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*CONTENTS*

**NOVELETTES** *Page*

THE MAN WHO HAD NO THUMBS
*By Noel Loomis* ..... 1

GREAT MEDICINE
*By Steve Frazee* ..... 96

**SHORT STORIES**

NEWCOMER
*By A. B. Guthrie, Jr.* ..... 52

THE CROOKED NAIL
*By Frank O'Rourke* ..... 28

JUDD
*By Jack Schaefer* ..... 82

ROCK BOTTOM
*By Nelson Nye* ..... 17

THE GUNNY
*By Robert Turner* ..... 120

THE KILLING AT TRIPLE TREE
*By Evan Hunter* ..... 60

THE OLD CHIEF'S MOUNTAIN
*By Bryce Walton* ..... 71

THIRST
*By John Prescott* ..... 40

THE BOY WHO SMILED
*By Elmore Leonard* ..... 130

BLUE CHIP LAW
*By Bill Erin* ..... 141

**FEATURES**

GUNSMOKE'S WESTERN MOVIE OF THE MONTH ..... 129

GUNSMOKE SALUTES ..... 51

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# The Man Who Had No Thumbs

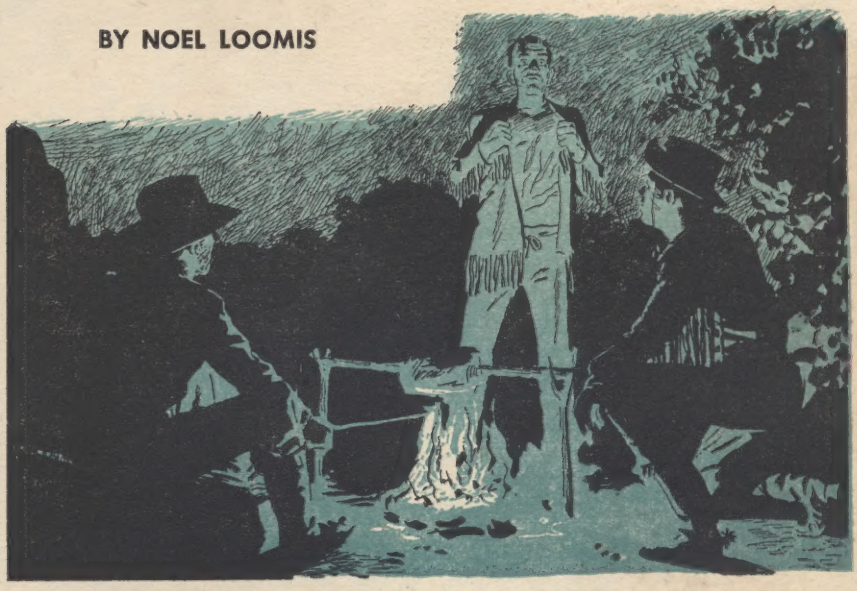
*The Mexican Government was offering one hundred pesos for each Apache scalp delivered. It was a perfect job for a man like Marson.*

**A NOVELETTE**

**BY NOEL LOOMIS**

JONAS MARSON sat cross-legged and unmoving, watching juice drip from the haunch of mule-meat and hearing it sizzle into the fire. He wore a big hat with the brim sagging at front and rear, and beneath it showed sandy hair, long and tangled, and matted at the back where he lay on it when sleeping. His chin was covered with sandy whiskers stained brown from tobacco juice.

Other men worked around him in the dark, sometimes visible in the blue glow of the burning cow-chips. All were dressed in buckskin shirts and pants and moccasins, and they walked silently as if from long habit. Jonas paid no attention to them.



A man moved up to the fire and turned the meat with a scalping knife. He was tall and gangling and had a hunch-back. His buckskin shirt was almost new, and a line of fifteen-inch fringes hung from the full length of each sleeve. He wiped the knife-blade on his pants and grinned wolfishly at Marson. "You settin' there and thinkin' about all the years Nellie carried you across these here deserts?"

Marson's cold blue eyes rolled up to Hooker's whiskery face. "You always got your mind on women."

"I heerd you say she was the best saddle-mule in Mexico."

"She served her time," Marson said. "She couldn't carry a full load no more."

"That's the way you play, ain't it, Marson? Ev'rybody's got to carry his end — mules and all. That's why you're runnin' this outfit — you're smart."

Marson didn't answer.

Hooker looked into the darkness. "I keep thinkin' about Hobart."

"What about him?"

"What's he doin' out there in the desert somewhere? When's he comin' back to get even?"

"What do you mean — get even?"

"I mean, well —"

"You mean you think I turned him over to the Apaches."

Hooker looked frightened. His head seemed to go down between his shoulders. "Not exactly —"

"If I did," Marson said, "he had it coming. He was a troublemaker. You heard him make threats to go to the governor at Chihuahua. He was breakin' up the company. I *had* to get rid of him."

"He said he was goin' to stop us killin'."

"You can't get scalps without killin'," Marson said.

"Only thing is — them Delawares say he's a bad hombre."

Marson's lids half covered his eyes. "Go help the Dutchman sideline them mules."

Hooker slid the knife into the waistband of his pants and went hurriedly.

A second man came up — a heavy, round-barreled man with big shoulders. His eyes were jerky and nervous but flat as a snake's. He sat down a little way from Marson and stared into the desert darkness.

"We're gettin' mighty far into Chiricahua country."

"We come here to hunt Apaches, didn't we?"

Bixby frowned. "There ain't many of us, and there's thousands of Apaches."

"The Apaches kill for fun. We kill for money." Marson paused, rubbing the palms of his big hands on his greasy black pants. "The state of Chihuahua guarantees us a hundred pesos for every buck Apache scalp we bring back." His cold eyes gleamed. "That's better than gold-mining — if we get where the Apaches are thick enough."

"What does the gover'ment want with scalps anyway?"

"Look!" Marson said impatiently. "The Apaches been depredatin' on the Mexicans for hundreds of years. Last year they practically come into Chihuahua itself and killed men and carried off women and kids. The Mexican *rurales* couldn't fight 'em, so they offered a bounty on 'em. That's where we come in. It's up to us," he said clumsily, "to save Mexico from the Apaches."

Bixby looked into the dark and frowned. "They say them Chiricahuas can take a sharp knife and make a man suffer more and live longer than any race that ever was."

Marson slapped his thigh impatiently. "Don't forget we got eighteen Delaware Indians with us — and the Delaware Indians are the best scouts and fighters in the United States."

"How many scalps did we get yesterday?"

Marson nodded at the tow-sack hanging on a pole over the fire. "Fourteen — but six are squaws' and bring half price."

Bixby grunted. "Why was a little party like that away from the main tribe?"

"Hunting, I imagine. If it's going to be a cold winter, the game will be gettin' out of the mountains."

Bixby looked to the northwest and drew his thick shoulders up together. "I wouldn't want to put in a winter up there. Them are the wildest mountains in the world."

"We'll have to go up there after 'em unless we find some more hunting parties." Marson fixed his eyes on Bixby. "The next time I send you around to the other side, you cut 'em off or I'll cut your head off. You let a buck and two squaws get away yesterday. That's two hundred dollars."

Bixby's eyes jerked. He looked off into the dark. "There's a lot of coyotes out," he said.

"They aren't all coyotes."

"It sounds to me like there's more of 'em to the northwest."

"There are," said Marson, staring at the meat.

Bixby started up. "You reckon Chiricahuas —"

"Might be."

"We better —"

Marson reached out one big arm and slammed the man back to the ground. "Stay sat! There's more Delawares around them than they have any idea."

"They're comin' this way."

Marson stared at him contemptuously. "I wonder you ever had nerve enough to be a scalp-hunter."

"I've seen some bodies after the Apaches got through with 'em," Bixby muttered. "Ears cut off, eyes burned out, brains cut open." He shuddered. "You remember Bill Jenkins? He was a scalp-hunter."

"Taught me my trade," said Marson. His big head raised sharply. Bixby saw the movement and stared into the blackness.

An Indian materialized on the other side of the fire. He was naked from the waist up, and the low blaze

of the fire seemed to lose itself in the duskiness of his red skin before it reached his face. He wore heavy gold earrings, and his black hair, tied in two parts with buckskin thongs, hung behind his shoulders. The handle of a scalping-knife protruded from the waistband of his elkskin pants, and a tomahawk was suspended at his side in a rawhide sling.

Marson's cold eyes moved upward. "*Kocu leu?*" he asked. "What is it?"

"*Pèu shu-wùn-uk,*" the Delaware said in his musical tongue. "A white man is coming."

"*Shin-gàh-leet?* Is he coming to fight?"

"*Túk-o.* No."

Marson's big head was motionless for a moment. He studied the deep shadows thrown upward across the bronze face by the blue glow from the fire. Then Marson said warily, as if to Bixby, "I don't know what a white man would be doing up here alone — but let him come." He nodded to the Delaware, who faded into the dark without a crunch of his mocasins on the hard sand.

"A white man," Marson repeated, and fingered the hilt of his big bowie knife, with a blade eighteen inches long and three eighths of an inch thick. He stared at the fire. "How would a white man get up here alone?"

"Maybe he was with a party that was attacked by the Apaches."

"There ain't no Mexican parties up in here," said Marson.

"Might be Americans."

"Too far south." Marson withdrew the knife and laid the end across his left forefinger. The finger was big, browned by the sun, and cracked at the joint. "This white man's a spy," he said.

Bixby watched the knife. Bixby's eyes looked hungry for a minute. Then he looked back into the dark.

Marson got up. He was as big standing as he looked sitting. He went to the fire, turned the meat spitted on the steel rod, and sliced off a big piece with one stroke of the bowie knife. The meat dripped blood, but he held it in both hands and bit out a mouthful, his matted hair moving as a mass when he moved his head.

He was sitting down, still eating, when they first heard the steps. He quit eating and sat stone-still, watching into the dark.

"I'll cover him for you," said Bixby.

"No need. If he makes a move, his back'll be full of Delaware arrows before he can draw a breath."

The crunch of dragging feet was clear in the night. They came closer. Marson sat still, with the meat in one hand.

## II

A tall, slender man stumbled toward the fire. He too was dressed in buckskin which looked old and worn, and he had no hat. His whiskers were black and curled tightly against his chin. His moccasins were worn

through, and his feet left blots of blood on the hard-packed surface of the sand.

Marson's eyes narrowed as he saw him, but Marson said nothing. The slender man drew himself up before the fire and fixed blood-shot eyes on Marson. His voice was a croak. "Water!" he said. "A little water."

Marson nodded. Bixby went to the wagon and came back with a horse's large intestine full of water. He held it out to the stranger, who took a small sip to rinse his mouth. He waited a minute, then took a cautious drink of the greasy fluid. Finally he looked up at Marson. "I got away from the Chiricahuas four days ago," he said. "I been walkin' ever since."

"You're a liar," Marson said coldly. "You never escaped from no Apaches after this long."

The stranger took another short drink. "How do you think I got away?"

"You was sent," said Marson.

"Who'd send me?"

"The Apaches. They hate my guts and so do you. You turned coyote, Al Hobart, when you found out we was after scalps."

Hobart ripped open his worn buckskin shirt at the front and showed a mass of white and red scars over his chest and stomach. "Does that look like something I asked for?" He took a final drink and handed the gut back to Bixby. "I didn't like it when you started scalping women and children; I said so."

"You run away," Marson accused, "to join the Apaches against my outfit."

Hobart was scornful. "You ever hear of anybody joining the Apaches?" The water had put life into him. He stood across the fire from Marson and asked, "Do I stay or do I light out for Chihuahua?"

"What do you want to go to Chihuahua for — to carry tales to the governor?"

"One of the first scalps you got *was* a Mexican," Hobart said calmly, but added, "I didn't *say* I wanted to cross two hundred kilometers of desert on foot — but I can."

Marson fingered the butt of his bowie knife, the handle of which was bound with the same fine brass wire as that on his shapeless hat, and studied it out.

Hobart didn't seem eager to go back into the desert alone. "If this had been a war-party the way you told me at first I wouldn't have put up a holler," he said. "I don't like scalping the way you do it, but if I go back to Chihuahua they might accuse me of deserting, and nobody would ever hire me as a guide again. On the other hand, you haven't got anybody else in your outfit that knows the Sierra Madres. That's why you been stalling out here on the *bolsón* so long with only a handful of scalps." He glanced at the almost-empty tow-sack.

Marson said finally, "If you can stay and mind your own business, I'll pay you the way I said."

"Including the last two months?"

Marson hesitated. Then his eyes were cold as he said, "Including all the time since we left Chihuahua." He paused. "But if you start talkin' against me again, I'll cut your head off myself the next time."

Al Hobart said slowly, "I never figured how the Chiricahuas got into camp that night through your Delawares — unless you told the Delawares to let 'em."

"Keep figurin'."

"And I never figured how they happened to pick on me that night and nobody else."

"Speak your piece," Marson growled.

"If I ever find out that was done by your orders, you'll *need* that big knife."

Marson grunted but said nothing.

Hobart glanced at the mule-meat. "Got anything to cut that with?"

Marson nodded. Bixby tossed a knife at Hobart. The blade gleamed as it turned end over end. Hobart caught it by the handle. He wrapped four fingers around it and held the butt against the heel of his hand. Somewhat awkwardly he sliced off a piece of raw meat, wolfed it down, and tossed the knife back to Bixby.

He seemed to draw a breath of relief. "If you got a blanket," he said, "and a piece of buckskin for moccasins, I'll make out till morning."

"See Stephens at the wagon."

Hobart turned slowly.

"Wait a minute," Marson said.

The slender man stopped and looked at Marson.

Marson did not look up at him. "Search him," he said to Bixby. "See if he's got a knife of his own."

Bixby looked puzzled. Then he grinned. "*Seguro.*" He waddled over to Hobart and felt around his waistband, inside the buckskin shirt, under the tight-fitting deerskin leggings, inside the sleeves so worn that hardly any fringes were left on them. He stepped back, his eyes looking over the man. Hobart kept his brown eyes on him, unreadable; they might have meant anything.

Bixby shook his head. "Nothin' on him."

"There could be something inside of him," Marson said, running big fingers through his tangled whiskers, "but there'll be a chance to find that out later on."

Hobart limped into the darkness.

Bixby let out his breath. "So he's back."

"Watch him," Marson said, and this time he didn't sound so sure of himself. "That Hobart was captured by the Comanches when he was a pup. They raised him and he learned all their tricks and some of his own. He's worse than any Apache that ever lived."

Bixby's flat eyes fastened on Marson. "He's been gone two months, hasn't he?"

"Yeah."

"A man can't live in the desert by himself for two months, can he?"

"Not the way I figger."

Bixby said, "The muscles on his waist are hard. He ain't starved."

Marson looked up, his eyes alive for the first time. "Like I said, keep an eye on him. I could turn him out, but I'd rather have him in my sight. Whatever he's up to, I'll be able to put my hands on him."

Bixby took a deep breath. He got up and went to the fire. He cut off a chunk of meat and came back with it in his hands. "Nellie don't look as tough as I calc'lated." He took a bite and then looked up. His mouth was full, and his bright, beady eyes watched Marson. "You notice, somethin' happened to his thumbs?"

"He hasn't got any," said Marson.

Bixby frowned. "Wonder what happened."

Marson got up — a ponderous man who yet moved like a jaguar. "Whatever it was, he had it comin'."

"You ain't curious about how?"

Marson took a deep breath that seemed to fill out his belly. "I don't have to worry about Hobart no more. A man can't cock a pistol without a thumb." . . .

## III

The camp was moving the next morning before daylight. Hobart led off toward the foothills of the towering Sierra Madres. Then came Marson on his mule, with Hooker beside him, and two more hunters behind them. The bushy-whiskered Stephens drove the wagon, followed by Bixby and three others. The Delawares fanned far out from the column in all directions; their job was to locate game, to forestall attacks, and to find parties of Indians that could be scalped.

They crossed open desert plains, mesas lightly timbered with scrub oak, and the great prairie began to slope up. It rose gradually at first, then began to dip and rise, and finally there were steep-sided washes that they had to go around. On the fifth day they went up a narrow cañon, with not even room to turn on the trail, and pines and junipers began to dot the steep mountainsides. Then the mountains seemed to close in on them, with mile-high cliffs, huge granite blocks dumped end on end and left that way, wild white-water torrents pouring through bottomless cañons, and ragged rocky steps that mounted endlessly to the blue sky. Behind them, the sky was brassy and the sun like a leaping flame, but Marson drove the mule-train on to the northwest.

Great outcroppings of black granite appeared, and each time they had to find a way upward over the rock. Each time the air got thinner. The ground became harder, and they had to shoe the mules. Small cedars, twisted into grotesque shapes by the fantastically cold and violent winter winds of the Sierra Madres, grew around the outcroppings, and presently these gave way to pines and the great spruce.

And it seemed that the higher they went and the deeper they pen-

etrated the savage country, the deeper grew the antagonism between Marson and Hobart. Even the Delawares knew it was there. And if any man had a leaning one way or the other — which was doubtful — he kept it to himself. This was a fight between Marson and Hobart. Eventually it would erupt, and probably Hobart would be killed; then the business of scalp-hunting would be resumed.

Scalps had not been plentiful. They had not, in fact, found a single Apache since that night when Hobart had appeared out of the desert. There were no more small hunting-parties to be massacred, and grumbling began to be evident in the muttered tones of two men as they went to hunt deer or as they took guard-duty over the mules at night. The Delawares came and went, silently, more unseen than seen. They found some game, but no Chiricahuas. The mules were gaunt; the men lost weight; even Marson sloughed off some meat, but it only made him look harder and tougher.

Marson called Hobart one day. "Where's the Apaches?"

Hobart took his time answering. He looked at the low, thin cloud-bank beyond the mountains. A few great cranes were following a canyon toward the south. Hobart said finally, "On up, is my guess."

Marson growled, "How high do these damn' mountains go?"

"To the top."

Marson stared at him. "There's villages up in here. Where are they?"

"Can't your Delawares find them?"

Marson swelled up. "If you want your cut of the profits, you'd better come through." His eyes narrowed as if he had had a shrewd thought. "You don't owe them Chiricahuas anything, do you, that you have to protect them?"

"They can protect themselves up here," Hobart said, "if they use any sense at all."

"They don't."

"No," said Hobart. "They don't murder for money."

Marson fingered his bowie knife. "Why are you so squeamish? They said in Chihuahua you'd raised more scalps than any man in Mexico."

Hobart drew himself up, lean and tough and dangerous. "I've raised hair," he said, "and I would have come on a war-party. But you knew enough about me to know I wouldn't like scalping for money. That's why you got me drunk and shanghaied me. You'll pay for that, Marson. I've done a lot of things I'm not proud of, and mostly I've filled up on mescal and forgotten 'em, but this one I don't forget. I didn't know you were out to exterminate the Apache Nation by killing off squaws and kids."

Marson said, "You came back fast enough."

"When a man needs water, he can't worry about other things. Besides, you owed me money."

"Where's the Apache towns?" Marson insisted.

Hobart shrugged. "They're here one day, somewhere else the next. There's only one town in this part of the mountains that stays put and that's Santa Margarita, over the hump."

"Indians there?"

Hobart shook his head. "All Mexicans, living on top of a silver mine — the richest mine on earth."

Marson's cold eyes gleamed. "Is that Tayopa?"

Hobart watched him. "Who knows?"

"How do they stand off the Indians?"

The scalp-hunters stood around them now on the wind-swept shelf of rock — Bixby, Hooker, Stephens, and the others, all gaunt, unshaved, hard-eyed killers — and Hobart looked around as if amused. "The Indians don't fight very systematically unless they're mad. The Mexicans in Santa Margarita don't do anything to make them mad." Hobart swept the audience with his eyes, then faced Marson again. "They don't murder children for twenty-five pesos a head, and women about to have babies for seventy-five."

"What are you talkin' about?" growled Marson.

"I figgered it was the last straw when you cut open a dead Indian squaw so you could scalp the baby she was carryin'."

Marson's face began to turn dark. The circle around them stretched out a little. "I could make you eat what you just said."

"Maybe," said Hobart, watching him.

"But I need you. I'm gonna keep you working for me like you agreed, because you're the only one who knows these mountains. Then when we come back I'm gonna cut your head off and feed it to the coyotes."

"Good enough," Hobart said.

He waited until Marson turned away. Then he resumed his way up the endless slope.

## IV

It was a world above a world up there — wild, forbidding, friendless, but one evening Hobart came into camp with a dressed-out bear carcass on his back. He said nothing, but dropped it before the fire, and left.

Bixby's flat eyes followed him until he disappeared among the rocks. "How'd he get that critter?" asked Bixby. "He hasn't got a pistol, and he couldn't shoot one if he did."

Marson turned the carcass with his moccasin. "He's got a knife," he said harshly.

So the antagonism between the two men grew and festered and spread, like maggots in a dead horse as the company got higher into the mountains. Up there the wind was always like a gale and it was always cold, but Hobart, at Marson's order, led up and up.

Within a week Marson called Hobart to the fire. It was night and the wind was biting cold. It whistled through the rocks until even the mules turned tail to it.

"Where's Santa Margarita?"

Hobart's eyelids dropped a little. "I told you that's a Mexican town," he said.

"I ast you where it is."

"Are you aimin' to scalp Mexicans now?"

Marson looked at him with hatred. "I'm runnin' this company. Where's Santa Margarita?"

"I'll show you if you promise not to massacre the Mexicans for their scalps."

Marson was suddenly on his feet. He had moved astonishingly fast for a big man. And his bowie knife, as big as a sword, was in his hands. "You lead the way," he said harshly, "or I'll —"

"Cut my head off," Hobart said.

Marson's leathery face began to turn black.

Hobart suddenly broke and backed away.

Marson drew a great breath and thrust the knife back in its holster. "Dirty mare-suckin' coward!" he growled.

Hooker grinned his wolfish grin. "You don't need to be scared of him," he said. "He can't shoot and he can't knife-fight. He's got no thumbs."

Bixby said, "He never told how he lost them thumbs, did he?"

Marson glanced coldly at him. "I don't care how he lost his thumbs," he said finally.

"Naw," said Hooker. "All you you want is to see him lose his head." Hooker frowned, puzzled. "I never figgered Hobart would take a dare like that."

Marson looked into the darkness at the spot where he had last seen Hobart. "Every man," he said, "comes to a place where he has to eat his own spit." But his voice did not carry the assurance that his words seem to indicate.

The next morning, when the Delawares reported there still was no fresh Apache sign, Al Hobart led the company up over a spur to the southwest. There had been a spit of snow up there the night before, and Bixby shivered as they faced the sweeping wind. "I don't like none of this," he grumbled. "Hobart rides up there out of sight, and he's the only one knows anything about this country."

"He'll take us where we want to go," said Marson. "He knows what'll happen to him if he don't." . . .

Their supplies gave out, and they began to kill mules of necessity. The weaker ones went first. One of the scalp-hunters, beating a balky mule over the head with a bridle, slipped on a crumbly shelf of rock and dropped eight hundred feet to the bottom of a canyon. They didn't bother to go after his body. So now there were nine white men left, and the mule-meat stretched further. Marson did not feed it to the Delawares. "They're Injuns," he said. "They don't have to be fed."

They saw Hobart twice a day — in the morning before daylight and at night after dark, when he came

to the fire to claim his piece of mule-meat.

Marson objected one day. "You don't need any of my meat. You can find your own."

For perhaps the first time a glint appeared in Hobart's eyes. "The deal was for found," he said. He looked at Marson, and there was a hint of a smile on his lean and wind-weathered face. "The more I eat," he said, "the less you have." . . .

They heard the bells of Santa Margarita one clear morning before the wind rose. They couldn't see the village, but Hobart led them down a perilous trail in a sheer canyon wall, twelve hundred feet to the bottom, and they came out in a grassy valley a couple of hundred varas wide, with a twenty-foot-wide stream roaring through the middle of it.

"It don't look safe to me," said Bixby, his eyes darting up and up to the top. "A man couldn't get out of here nohow."

"We didn't come to run," Marson reminded him. "We come for scalps — and maybe something else."

Hooker, his awkward knees sticking out on both sides of his saddle-mule, grinned. "You figure there's any women at this here town?"

"There's always women," Marson said coldly.

They could see Hobart for a while, riding far ahead down the canyon, keeping in touch with them through the Delawares, but presently he was gone. Later they turned up a second canyon and began to climb again. At the end of the second day they reached the top of the ridge, and the next morning again they heard the bells.

Marson said to Hobart, "We heard them bells two days ago. You leadin' us in a circle?"

Hobart had seemed more and more sure of himself as they had come higher and deeper into the mountains. Now he answered, "What difference does it make, as long as you get there?"

"We can't eat mule-meat forever."

That wasn't the answer Marson would have liked to make, but it was worrying him some, getting so far into the mountains. Nine men wasn't a very big party, and you had to knock off one for Hobart; he'd never fight with the rest of them; he was too much Indian. The Delawares were Indians, and a man never knew what an Indian was thinking or what he would do. On the other hand, it was a long way back, and their tow-sack had only a few scalps in the bottom instead of bulging full as Marson had visioned it. He maintained contact with Hobart through the Delawares, and kept the company going forward. . . .

Santa Margarita was a tiny Mexican village perched on a narrow shelf of black rock half-way down a mountainside. Marson and Bixby and Hooker stood on a cliff so high they could hardly see the bottom, and studied the town, a league away across the canyon and two thousand varas lower. It was late evening.

From where they watched they could see the blazing sun setting behind higher and still more rugged peaks covered with new snow. But down below them the grass and the trees were green, and the dull waxy green of orange-leaves was plain in the soft light. Thin columns of fragrant cedarwood smoke rose straight into the air and then mingled into a single column before it reached the chill torrent of air sweeping over the mountain.

"There's the church," Marson said with satisfaction.

Bixby said, "'Bout twenty houses. You reckon it's worth it?"

Marson's eyes were narrow. "They're sittin' on top of a silver mine. Hobart said so." Marson grunted with satisfaction. "Hobart never realized he told me that."

"You reckon they've got any silver?"

"Couldn't help it. They've been there for hundreds of years, diggin' it up. There's prob'ly tons of the stuff in that old church."

"Do you think we ought to fight the church?" asked Hooker.

Marson said nastily, "Them priests bleed like anybody else."

"I ain't worried about the church," said Bixby, scanning the trail on the opposite side of the canyon. "You seen Hobart today?"

Marson looked up quickly. "What could he do?"

"He could warn 'em down there."

"My Delawares been watchin' every move he makes. They got orders to knife him if he tries to signal."

"And he hasn't?"

"I can guarantee that."

Bixby nodded slowly. "Only thing is, it don't seem right for him to give up so easy."

"He knows when he's licked. He can't fight anyway. He hasn't got any thumbs."

Bixby turned toward him. He might have been about to say something, but, if so, he changed his mind. He turned back to Santa Margarita. "There's people down there."

"Twenty houses — maybe sixty, eighty scalps." His eyes gleamed. "Maybe five thousand dollars."

"There'll be women," said Hooker, grinning.

Marson spoke slowly. "There'll be silver too — enough to go where a man wants to go. I'll take my women in Mexico City — maybe even in Paris." He drew a deep breath.

Hooker was watching the village again. "No sense in waitin' that long," he said.

The yapping of dogs came to them on the wind. "There'll be a moon tonight," said Marson. "As soon as it comes up we'll cross the canyon and go down the trail. You take four men and get on the other side. We'll split the Delawares between us. We'll get the lay of things, and I figure by two–three o'clock in the morning we'll attack. The first clear peal of the church-bell came to them, mellow, measured, serene. "They'll all be through makin' love

by that time, and we'll have the mountains to ourselves."

"What about the priest?"

"His scalp's worth a hundred dollars," Marson said coldly.

"What if the governor at Chihuahua —"

"How can he tell the difference between an Apache and a Mexican? They're both brown skins; they both got straight black hair. The main thing is: kill every one. If one gets away, he can tell."

"They won't get away from me," Bixby promised.

Hooker grinned, thinking his own thoughts.

A half hour later Marson told Hobart what he wanted. Hobart asked, "Are you goin' to scalp these Mexicans?"

"Don't worry about what I'm gonna do. Just lead us right or you'll die with this knife in your jugular vein."

Hobart's lips parted. He closed them. He looked down at his thumbless hands. Finally his eyes left Marson. He looked at the village below, which now was in deep shadow and would have been indistinguishable except for the tiny yellow lights of deer-fat candles. Hobart's hand went to his waist, but finally he said, "The Mexican governor will have your head for a stunt like this, Marson."

The big man laughed. "If he could get my head, he wouldn't have sent me after Apaches."

The lights of Santa Margarita went out early, but the scalp-hunters, traveling in a tight group except for the Delawares, were already across the chasm, and some time after midnight they were within shouting distance of the small cluster of adobe huts. Marson stopped to repair a broken cinch-strap with the fine brass wire.

"Go 'way around," he told Bixby. "Look out for the dogs. Give me an owl-hoot three times when you're ready."

Bixby and his four men left the trail, going above the village to avoid the rising air currents. Four men went with him, each armed with two six-shooters and at least two knives, plus whatever personal weapon each man preferred.

Marson counted noses. He had three men at his back and Hobart at his side. The Delawares spread out and lost themselves on the mountainside. When the attack started, the Delawares would swarm over the village from all sides.

They waited, each man with his hand on his mule's nose. Finally, across the night winds, came the hoot of an owl, echoing eerily up the canyon. It came again, and a third time. Marson growled, "No prisoners!" and swung into the saddle.

He beat the mule into a gallop. In the darkness he could hear the Delawares closing in at both sides. He kept to the trail.

They charged into the little area that held the town. Marson began to yell. The Delawares joined in with

their blood-chilling war-cry. Bixby hammered on a door with the butt of a revolver. "*¡Abre la puerta in nombre del rey!* Open up, in the name of the king!"

A door opened. A shot sounded. A groan. The door crashed in. Its rawhide hinges shrieked as they gave away. A woman screamed, and there was another shot. Then children shrieked, and there was silence for an instant.

By that time the moonlit town was filled with fighting figures. The scalp-hunters swung knives and clubs like fiends; they fired only when they had to. Marson himself rode into the church on his mule and cut off the priest's head with his big knife, swung like a guillotine.

The mountainside swelled with the whoops of the Delawares, the yells of the hunters, the pleas of the cornered, and the curses of the dying.

Hobart rode alongside Marson. He took no part in the killing, but Marson didn't care. Marson was drunk now on blood and carnage, and when it was over he would wind it up by taking care of Hobart. Nobody would ever know the difference in this excitement.

Hooker was down, scalping bodies. He yanked off a long, black-haired scalp with a loud pop, and held it up in the moonlight. "There's women here!" he screamed at Marson.

Marson pulled up his mule and looked around. All over town, men were on the ground, ripping off scalps. Marson started to dismount. Hobart dismounted with him, and Marson gripped his bowie knife and started around the rump of the mule.

But a new sound came on the night air:

"Wah-wah-wah-wah-wah-ee-yah — WA-A-A-AH!"

Marson froze in his tracks. "Apaches!" he said hoarsely.

Hobart was coming at him then. The man's slender face was grim in the moonlight, and his eyes were filled with the glitter of revenge. The long fingers of his right hand were wrapped around the butt of a scalping-knife, holding it against the heel of his hand. The blade stood at an awkward angle, but there was no mistaking that it could kill.

Marson was stunned for a moment. Then as Hobart reached him he swung the big knife like a sword. Hobart swung to one side. The heavy blade cut into Marson's own saddle.

Flames roared up from the church as the Chiricahuas swept down into the town. Marson fired a six-shooter with his left hand. He had the satisfaction of seeing blood spread over Hobart's face. The man's left cheekbone was plainly missing in the light of the fire, and blood was pumping out of the open flesh. But Hobart closed in with the long, thin-bladed knife. Against the cracking of the fire and the yells of the Chiricahuas, there was sudden silence from the scalp-hunters. In the red glow of the fire, Hobart's face didn't change.

His knife slid in between Marson's ribs. His hand without a thumb threw Marson's arm to one side, his long fingers wrapped around Marson's wrist.

Marson cut at him savagely with the big knife, but Hobart closed in. His knife was out of Marson's ribs and in again.

Marson pushed him back with all his weight. Hobart stumbled. Marson fired again with the six-shooter, and saw Hobart jerk when the ball hit him. But Hobart came up under Marson's bowie knife. The thin blade of Hobart's knife went through Marson's right wrist. The bowie knife fell from Marson's fingers while Hobart rolled into him and kept the pistol-arm flung wide. The man was slippery as an eel. Marson couldn't get hold of him and he couldn't shoot. He sank his teeth in the back of Hobart's neck. Hobart raised hard and butted him in the face; Marson's knife gleamed redly on the ground in the light of the burning church. Hobart backed away for an instant. Marson shook his big head to get his wits back. He roared at Hobart with both arms wide, but the slender man stepped back as Marson leaped. He swung one foot and kicked Marson under the chin as he fell. He took the pistol. A rawhide thong slipped around Marson's neck. He saw Hobart pick up his big knife. Then he lost consciousness.

When he came to, he felt as if all the fiends of hell were crawling up and down his backbone. He started to his feet, but couldn't move. He tried to roar, but found his tongue was split and swollen. He got his eyes open.

He was naked, lying on his face. Hobart sat cross-legged at one side, holding a knife in his four-fingered hand. An Apache with a red headband sat on the other. Marson felt movement over his face and tried to brush it off, but his hands were staked down.

He saw the ants crawling over him from the hill beneath his belly. He felt their sharp pincers in his flesh, and suddenly he screamed. The screaming opened the cuts in his tongue and filled his mouth with blood. He coughed it out, and lay there, panting.

The sun came down on his back like a hot iron. The blood made his mouth and throat as dry as old wood.

The Apache looked at Hobart. "*Besh?*" he asked. "Knife?"

Hobart nodded slowly. The Apache took a knife from the deerskin pocket below his knee and went to work on Marson's back. Marson fainted when the Indian flayed back a piece of skin as big as his hand, and the ants began to crawl over it.

Marson regained consciousness late that night. Hobart was still sitting there. Marson's voice was a croak. "I'll give you anything you want if you'll let me up."

Hobart pointed to the small group of low-thatched *jacales* spread out

under red-barked wild-cotton trees. "You were lookin' for a Chiricahua camp. This is it." He nodded at the ring of beady-eyed Indians, with moccasins turned up at the toes, who now surrounded them. "They would kill me if I interfered with their fun. Anyway, what does it matter? You'll be dead only once."

"They're fiends," Marson said hoarsely.

"Like you said, they kill for fun. They also kill for revenge. If they happen to admire you, they'll kill you without marking up your body." Hobart paused. "I don't think your body will be recognizable, Marson. You had some Apache scalps in your tow-sack."

"You set them on us," said Marson. How?"

"You sent word to the Chiricahuas to come and get me. You gave them the brass wire to hang me up by my thumbs. I got poisoning in my thumbs, but I didn't die. After five days in the sun they cut me down. My thumbs were both cut to the bone by that fine wire, and gangrene was starting. I borrowed a knife and cut off both of them. They were impressed, Marson, and I made a deal with them. If they'd let me go, I'd bring you to them. That's why I came back."

"How did they know? The Delawares were watchin' you every minute. You never had any contact with the Chiricahuas."

"The Delawares are mighty good scouts," said Hobart, "but they're no match for the Chiricahuas in their own country. When the Chiricahuas know you're in the mountains, they can watch you for weeks and you'll never know it. And they aren't dumb, Marson. I told them I'd take you to Santa Margarita and they could nail you there. So they just watched and waited."

The Apache with the knife came toward them. Marson tried to scream again when the knife-blade started to work on his back, but his tongue was too swollen. He felt the ants crawling into his raw flesh, and opened his eyes. Hobart was toying with the big bowie knife, hefting it with the four fingers of his right hand, but Marson didn't have time to hope.

A spasm of pain went through him, and he twisted against the rawhide ropes which only became tighter.

Marson was a big man and he was hard. But not hard enough. The crags along the Rio Mayo rang with his screams for three days before the Apaches finished with him. It would have been longer, but even the Apaches couldn't keep him alive forever.

# Rock Bottom

*It was a crazy thing to do with the posse so close behind him, but he couldn't help himself. He had to wait and find the girl.*

BY NELSON NYE

HE STOOD there like a fool, with time running through his fingers and knowing it and not doing anything about it. A man with Sam Haslop on his backtrail ought to be pounding leather. Farradine didn't

know why he'd come into the town in the first place. Need of a horse was poor excuse for a man with a price on his scalp showing his face in a place this size. He wondered how crazy a man could get for a woman.

Six weeks now and he still couldn't get the picture of her out of his mind. It had been night and dead dark and just for a moment he'd seen her as she passed through the narrow glare of a pine knot torch. But that had been enough. The funny part was, he couldn't remember too much what she really looked like. All he could remember was a glimpse of a crinkly fresh blue dress, red hair, a kind of sweet, small featured face and haunted eyes. He'd known a dozen prettier women. He wasn't sure what it was. But she stayed there in his mind, and finally that vision of her fetched him back here.

The best Farradine could figure was that maybe she was flesh and blood of the dreams he'd had through long nights in the crackle and snap of countless hidden campfires. All the women a man dreams of, perhaps, all in one. An illusion, suddenly, miraculously come to life.

He hadn't been able to do anything about it that night, of course. What could a man do about a woman like that, a man *Wanted* and broke, pawing through garbage in back of the *Aces Up?* But things were different now, and so he'd come back. A little different. He was still *Wanted* but he wasn't still broke. Not by a long haul. The crazy thing was, he still wasn't doing anything about it.

All day long he'd been drifting around town, staying in the shadowed places as much as possible, not really making a move, just backing and filling like a man that didn't have all his buttons. And with Sam Haslop working closer and closer every jump of the clock; with town marshals alerted all over the cactus. Not that he could really stomp about asking questions, not with his own ugly picture staring back at him from every post and outhouse from this place to Naco. He thought about the sonofabuck printer who'd made a pot off that job and cruised him to Hell's half highway. All Farradine had to be thankful for was that it hadn't been too much of a likeness — even as dodgers go. Not that you needed any spitting image in a place like this where a man had two strikes against him just by reason of being a stranger.

Even just thinking the word stranger struck a sad chord within him. There was no word in the language Farradine hated worse than that one. Seemed lately like he'd always been a stranger. He could go into a place bulging with noise and as soon as folks got a look at him the talk would wizzle out until things were three shades quieter than the footfalls of a spider. It was as if he packed a chip on his shoulder when all he really wanted was a little sociability. He didn't understand it.

A vision of the girl came leaping back into his mind again then and it was like a needle in him and he knew once and for all that he had to do something about her. At least he could find out if she was still buying her grub here, if she had maybe moved or got talked into a set of double harness. It hurt him to even think about that. He knew somehow that this girl had stirred up the lonesomeness that had always been in him, made it sharp, and he couldn't seem to get away from it the way he had always been able to do, before.

It was funny about that lonesomeness. Sometimes it didn't bother him at all and he was a man who didn't care whether school kept or not. Then again he would be afraid of his own self and shack up someplace with a sackload of rotgut and pour it down until he couldn't raise a glass from the table. Sometimes he'd buy up a whole straddle house and make all the girls loll around him as though he was one of those high muck-a-muck rajahs. No matter, he'd always been able to get rid of it or dull it, anyhow, before this. But not since he'd seen that girl.

Once, his father had told him: "Jeff, the only thing that might save you is a good woman. Find one, kid, and fast." He thought about the old man, the staunch, ram-rodded old God-fearing Covenanter and all the things he said and stood for, and the way the old one used to lay the rod to him. Last thing the old man had said before Farradine rolled his cotton: "Just one end to the road you're travelin', son. Round and made of hemp, with a knot to keep the slack out." That was because he'd never found a good woman. Not until now, at least. This one he knew was good, the same way he'd known all the others were not.

The crazy thoughts skittering through his head, Farradine wedged deeper between the cluster of barrels stacked in the shadow of the wooden awning's overhang and watched the shimmer of heat that curled and crawled above the warped plank walk, while he tried to figure what was best to do to go about finding this girl, instead of just dreaming about her.

What he had been doing was staying out of sight and keeping his eyes peeled, figuring if she was still around the town, like as not she'd eventually pass this warehouse. But it had been hours now and it hadn't happened. He was beginning to know that it wasn't going to happen. How much longer he could even risk staying in the town at all, he didn't know. Some one would pin him down for Sam Haslop if he stuck around much longer. Several men had already sent curious glances his way, in passing.

Farradine knew that Sam Haslop wasn't far behind him, and would be here soon. Old Sam might not be extra bright but he was plenty thorough. He could read signs across bare rock and even point out where a fly

had stopped to scratch itself. And if there was one thing Sam Haslop aimed to do in this life, it was to put Jeff Farradine where cold weather couldn't bother him.

Haslop was sheriff of Cochise County where a lot of Farradine exploits had happened of late. Like that job at Doz Cabezas where Farradine had run off those registered Morgans, the pride of the countryside. Like that Mercantile at Sunglow and that deadfall over at Pearce. But the Cowman's Bank at Bisbee was the one that really got Haslop. Farradine had walked into that without a mask on or anything right in the middle of the afternoon last Friday and departed unscathed with twelve thousand dollar's worth of brand-new folding money. Sam Haslop considered that an insult no sheriff would put up with, Farradine knew.

Well, Farradine reckoned he'd give himself until next Stage time. That meant he had about four hours to find that girl and do whatever he was going to do about her and get riding. Not much time for a job he'd already spent three days and nights on. He allowed the only thing now was to get out and start asking about her.

He got another cold snack out of the barrel where he'd stashed it and knocked the neck off a bottle of luke-warm beer. Things were livening up over across the street now. The two cowhands who'd been snoozing in the lee of Wells-Fargo's plank awning got up and stretched. They shook dust off their clothes and looked around and jawed awhile and then high-heeled it in the direction of Kelly's bar.

Farradine figured that was as good a cue as any. He pulled down the brim of his hat, dropped the emptied bottle into a barrel. He stepped out into the sun and started across the wheel-tracked street. The sun felt like a brass hammer pounding the top of his head. He could feel it through his hat, even. The dust underfoot burned through his bootsoles as though he walked on coals just raked from a fire.

Not looking around, he kept his eyes on the Stage office. He knew people were watching him but he didn't hurry. Rock Bottom was a cowtown. The one thing you would not find here was a man afoot, hurrying. Being afoot was bad enough. Cowhands used a horse every time they stepped outside to spit.

Dragging a sleeve across his face, Farradine stepped onto the planks of Wells-Fargo's porch. His glance took in the warsacks left by the pair who had just hoofed it toward Kelly's. He worried about that. What were they up to, those two, hanging around this end of town? In scorch weather like this, cowhands mostly holed up at a saloon. Another suspicious thing, neither one of them had a saddle. Farradine stopped wondering if they were a couple of Haslop's men and pulled open the stage station door.

It was cool and dim inside, with a tongue-in-groove counter running across the far half. It was as good a place as any to start his quest, Farradine figured. Back of the counter a gent in a green eyeshade sat on a swivel beneath a hanging lamp, thumbing his way through a batch of yellow papers. He seemed unaware of Farradine's entrance.

After awhile the clerk snapped a rubber band about the papers and shoved them into a pigeon hole. He scratched the nape of his neck with a pencil. He fished a splinter of wood from a vest pocket and dug into what was left of his teeth.

Farradine cased the room with a covert glance, the way he always did a strange place. There was a pair of windows to the left, the lower halves of them open. The door was behind him. He turned and suddenly felt a rush of sickness, coming face to face with his own picture scowling back at him from a placard tacked to a wall, with the glaringly big-lettered *$500 Reward* printed under it. Farradine forced his eyes from the poster, moved down to the other end of the counter, tugging his hat down farther, his big-rowelled spurs making too much noise.

"With you in a jiffy," the clerk said.

Farradine looked at a paper-wrapped parcel on the desk and wondered how to go about asking about the girl in the blue dress. All at once he wished he hadn't come in here. The craziness of this whole thing hit him all of a heap. He watched the clerk wipe off his makeshift toothpick and tuck it back into his pocket. He saw the clerk start to hoist his feet to the desk and then spot Farradine and haul off the swivel and lolly up to the counter. "Yeah?" the clerk said.

Farradine burst with what he wanted to ask, but it wouldn't come out. After a crazy long while he said: "Uh — what time's that stage for Globe pullin' outa here?"

He regretted the question as soon as he'd asked it. He knew he sounded like a man too anxious to get out of town. Yet he somehow hadn't been able to be fool enough to ask this tooth-sucking rooster if he knew a sorrel-maned filly who'd been wearing a blue dress one night six weeks ago. Half the jills in town would likely have blue dresses. Probably all cut from the same bolt of goods.

"Seven-fifty-three," the clerk said. "You want a ticket?"

"I'll let you know." Farradine moved doorward, sourly certain now he'd never find the girl, just asking questions, even if he could get to it.

As he came onto the porch, inspiration hit him. He could make out to be a corset drummer. He could go over to the Mercantile and suggest putting on some kind of a contest. He could say he was looking for a girl to model for him and for the use of her name, face and figure in a little promotion deal, his firm was prepared to pay. . . .

Hell, but he didn't have time for

all that routine. He'd been here too long already. And with old Sam Haslop due behind him, any minute. He stood there worrying about it and scowling and thinking he could just damn well make the time and to hell with Haslop. Because this would work. The Mercantile's proprietor was bound to know every jill who traded around here. He could likely suggest which ones were pretty enough to stand a chance and if one of them was redheaded. . . .

He stepped off the porch, and disgust with his own stupidity swept him. He didn't look like any drummer. He had the wrong kind of clothes, just this brush-clawed range garb. He hadn't shaved for a week. He didn't even have any sample case.

But perhaps, he thought, he could pretend he'd been stuck up and all his clothes stolen from him, along with his luggage. He wheeled back onto the porch and looked into the Wells-Fargo door again. The clerk was still by the counter. He had his probe stick out again but this time he was cleaning his nails with it. Farradine asked: "When did the *last* stage come through here?"

"Monday," the clerk told him, without looking up.

Three days. That was good enough. He could tell the Mercantile's owner he had wandered off to go to the toilet while the driver stopped to blow the horses, and then the damned fool had pulled out without him.

Satisfied, Farradine stepped into the street once more, then stopped stiff still. For the space of three heartbeats his mind wouldn't function. He got moving again, finally, but chilling sweat beaded out of every pore in his body. Somehow he kept himself from staring at the five men on horses who sat saddles in a cluster in front of the Marshal's office. Farradine forgot all about the Mercantile and his plan. He forgot about the girl. The only need in his mind was to get under cover.

He hadn't thought that stage clerk had spotted him but if that was Sam Haslop's bunch they would not need any placards. He swung left across the street on a downbearing tangent that kept his profile away from the men on the horses, remembering the butts of rifles sticking up over their pommels. His back muscles writhed. His knees felt limp as though they were jointed with rubber, but he was too old a hand to show the least sign of hurry. Getting across that street was the scaringest three minutes he'd ever put in.

The warehouse from where he had watched the Stage office was almost a block north of him. There were three frame shacks that looked like residences before that. He went up to the nearest one, grasped the knob and went inside without knocking, shoving the door shut behind him.

Temporary blindness from the street glare made the place a murk of shadows for the moment. Somewhere in the dim depths he heard

the echoes of a bell's strident clamor. The tap-tap of heels moved leisurely along the hallway.

Farradine sleeved his damp, bearded cheeks, thinking now in reaction how he'd been spooked off the street like a tincanned bronc. Those horse-backers probably weren't Sam's men at all. They hadn't fired or shouted, hadn't even seemed to notice him. He swore softly at his own lily-livered jumpiness. Barging into this house, unasked, might well bring about the very thing he'd sought to avoid.

The shadows weren't so heavy in the room now. The floor was uncarpeted, he saw. The heel taps came on, sounding nearer. Farradine made out several divans and a couple of fancy rockers. The room was twenty feet long by maybe fourteen across. A piano stood at one end. An ornate bar loomed at the other. There was one window, facing on the street and it was draped with some heavy red cloth that shut off the view inside and out. Now, kind of hushed and faint, he caught the scrabble of voices somewhere in the house. Then there was the throaty laughter of a woman.

His narrowed gaze hit the pictures on the wall and his eyes went wide. He drew a ragged breath and didn't know whether to grin or cuss. He had no manner of doubt now, where he was. He'd busted into a straddle house.

At first he reached behind him for the knob, figuring to get out of there. But at the last second he changed his mind. He could stay here as well as anyplace else. It didn't seem now as if those boys outside were after him, anyhow. If they were, if they had seen him, they'd be hammering the door with gun butts by this time.

He took an easier breath and noticed that the high heels had quit their tapping. He wasn't alone any longer. He turned around.

The woman loomed over him. She was well over six feet and broad in proportion. She wore a dirty purple wrapper with ruffles going over her shoulders. Her bare arms looked as big around as fenceposts. There was a mole on her chin and her hair was cut in bangs over her horse-face, and a bunch of paper flowers was twined into the top of it.

"You fixin' to stand there all night?" she said. "You might as well sit down, mister. Take the load off your feet." She showed a twittery smile. "Be a couple of minutes yet. Most my girls is busy right now. Sarie will be out, though, after she fixes up some. She only just now got up. She had a — This the first time you been here, ain't it?"

Farradine said: "I didn't know about this place, before."

"Where you been, cowboy? Out at some line shack?" Then she said, before he could answer: "I guess you'd like a shot of something — bourbon, Scotch, rye?"

The woman started toward the bar and Farradine heard the shuffle

of bare feet in the hallway. A girl came into the room. Farradine sniffed the perfume of her, then turned, and his eyes suddenly felt as though they would roll off his cheekbones.

The old woman laughed. "She gets 'em all poppin' their orbs, mister. Some class, huh? That's Sarie. Now what do you two want to drink?"

Farradine's guts felt as though a mule's hooves had hit them. She was just the way he remembered her, blue dress and all. Sarie. His mouth got full of acid and he suddenly felt like throwing up, but he couldn't stop staring at her. She was so slim in the waist but not anywhere else, just like he remembered. All woman. Farradine's eyes couldn't get away from the flare of her hips for a moment. Then he looked at that shining sorrel hair, so silky smooth and brushed back from her forehead. He was a little shocked at how pale she seemed in this light, though. Her skin seemed almost transparent, with blue shadow tracings under the eyes. She didn't look at Farradine at all. She didn't seem to be looking at anything. Her eyes were like doll eyes. She said to the old woman in a tired, disinterested voice: "The usual." Then she dropped limply onto a sofa, with her knees pressed tight together and slim white wrists crossed in her lap.

Farradine jerked his eyes from her, started toward the door. Halfway, he stopped. He stood, tanglefooted, uncertain. He didn't know what he wanted, now. He was filled with anger, disgust. Yet he was reluctant to go. Something about the girl still got through to him, pounding his pulses, making him hurt in a crazy pleasant way inside, rooting him where he stood in spite of any will to do otherwise.

The old woman said: "What's the matter, Sarie, honey? A man likes some notice. He doesn't come to my place to feel like he ain't wanted. Bare your teeth for him, Sarie."

She had small even white teeth that weren't dirty and rotted like most of these girls'. She smiled mechanically and still nothing came into her eyes. Those eyes were what really got Farradine. Their emptiness told him of the hurt and the lost feeling in her. Then the old woman, with her face bent over whiskey glasses, told Farradine: "Sit down by her, mister. She'll get woke up in a moment."

He lowered himself onto the edge of the sofa. The girl didn't move. She neither came near nor edged away. He had the feeling that nobody would ever really get close to her and that was a challenge that set him trembling. She sat still with her hands in her lap and when the madame came over to hand them each a shot-glass, Sarie accepted hers in much the same way she smiled, displaying all the animation of a toy that needed winding.

"That'll be a buck-four-bits," the madame said, her gnarled hand out. "The room'll be five dollars — pay-

able now. In coin of the realm."

There was suddenly a stupid, stunned look on Farradine's face. Caught now in the crosspull of contradictory emotions he found himself feeling needs and capacities he'd never guessed were even in him. He'd always supposed he was self-sufficient but the armor of that assurance now revealed spots incredibly thin. He was panicked that others might also discover these weaknesses.

He stood with such violent suddenness that half the whiskey in his glass sloshed onto Sarie's blue voile dress. He hadn't heard a word the old woman had been saying but that outthrust palm required no explanation.

He dumped a fistful of silver into the old woman's hand and motioned her away, too bewildered by the impulse which suddenly gripped him to find any energy for words.

The old woman stood with her head to one side, peering down at him. Her face twitched a nervous smile. She said: "You don't have to put up with her coldness, mister. Sometimes Sarie thinks she's too good for this sort of thing. But we'll get that out of her in time. You just wait a little bit, mister, and one of the others —"

"Sarie suits me fine," Farradine said. He put his arm around the girl. She felt rigid as a wooden doll. She stared at where the whiskey had turned the blue dress darkly damp. The slight hollows under her cheekbones looked shadowy and her face was all full of soft planes in the dim light.

"Hell, I'll buy you a new dress, Sarie," Farradine told her, eagerly. "An' a carriage. With a fine team of Morgans to pull it."

She looked at him for the first time, then, but still without expression in those blue, depthless, bad-hurt eyes. She stared at him, unblinking.

"Here," he said. "Drink this." He held what was left in his glass to her full, sensitive lips. Her eyes shut, the lashes dusky on her cheekbones. He watched her swallow and shudder. She strangled for a second and then her eyes came moistly open. He didn't blame her for the expression that was now in them, the first expression of any kind he'd seen in them.

"I'll look better," he said, "when I get shaved up. How would you like to get out of this dump?"

The blue of her eyes turned almost black for a moment and then went back the way they were, in all their empty hopelessness.

"I mean it," Farradine said. "I been casing this burg for three days, tryin' to find you."

The old woman's jaw set like granite. "You know this fool, Sarie?"

The girl shook her head. Her long fingers picked limply at the sides of her dress. Farradine watched them, marveling at the cleanness of the nails.

"We'll get hitched," he told her.

"Have a preacher tie the knot. For real. No more here in this place for you. We'll go off —,"

"That'll be enough!" The old woman glared at him, lips thinned. "She ain't goin' nowhere. Quit fillin' her head with ——"

Farradine's face turned to her and the look on it stopped her. "Keep your mouth out of this." He turned back to the girl. "I'm givin' it to you straight. Never mind her."

Sarie looked at him for a moment and her pallor grew greater so that Farradine thought she might be sick. Her eyes became more unreadable, inexpressably bleak. She formed several words with her soft, pale lips but none of them came out. Finally, she said: "No." It was just a whisper.

"Why not?" Farradine said desperately. "I'd be good to you. I'd ——"

Sarie's slim shoulders drooped. "No. It — wouldn't work. Nothing works."

"You're damn right it wouldn't work," the old woman, arms akimbo, said. "Quit badgerin' the girl. Do what you paid to do and get to hell out of here, Mister."

"Look!" Farradine ignored the old woman. He took one of the girl's hands. It felt limp and ice-cold. "Just give me a chance. That's all I'm asking."

"You'd want to know how I come to be in this place," Sarie said, dully. "All of you do."

"I'll never so much as ask one question."

"But you'd all the time be thinking." For the first time there was a little spirit in her soft voice. "Your mind would keep picking at it."

"Listen, Sarie," he said. "Please. You're not happy here."

"I'm all right." She jerked her hand away from his, then, wiped it on the side of her dress. Desperately, she said: "Just leave me alone."

Ignoring the madame's outraged stare, Farradine got up and hauled the girl to her feet. "Reckon I ain't no bargain, either, but I wouldn't ever ditch you. I'll change, you'll see. And if a man can start over, so can a woman, Sarie. I know."

Her lips came apart. A light came into her darkly blue eyes and then went out again. She studied his face as though he was speaking in a foreign tongue. He couldn't stand that. He said: "No matter what either of us might have been, we can ——"

"I'll get the marshal!" the madame screeched. She tried to lunge past them. Farradine got between her and the door.

"Take it slow," he said. "You're gettin' paid. Be thankful it ain't with no bullet." He wrenched a fist from his pocket, a crumpled wad of banknotes in it. He held it out to her without counting it. "Scare up a couple of horses and there'll be more."

She snatched the bills and backed away, her made-up eyes gleaming wildly. She went off down the hall, thrusting the money into her stocking, talking to herself.

Farradine looked at Sarie. She was trembling faintly all over now as she stood there looking down at her hands. She whispered: "It won't work."

"It'll work," he told her. "One thing I've never done is cross up a woman." He put a hand on her shoulder. Her trembling stopped. "I want you, Sarie. Not just — that way, either. I hope, give it time, you'll be wantin' me, too. It'll work, you'll see. You just let it."

She didn't answer.

"Come on," he said. He pulled open the door. She hesitated only a moment, not looking at him, then followed him out of the house in the stiff, dazed gait of a sleepwalker.

The sun was a red ball of fire on the mountains. Pretty, Farradine thought. He realized it was the first time he'd ever noticed anything like that. Pretty and quiet, it was. Like a kind of time for communion. He thought what a fine place the world could be if people would only let it. "Think you can stay on a horse?" he asked Sarie.

She didn't seem to hear him. She was looking past him, to his left. A voice from that direction said: "There won't be any horses."

Sarie's gaze held indifferently on the men in the street. Farradine turned to them and saw that Sam Haslop hadn't changed a bit. He still wore a threadbare vest and brush-clawed batwings. The inevitable wad of Picnic Twist still bulged one side of his bulldog face.

"Don't be scared, Sarie," Farradine said. "Remember what I told you."

The sheriff said: "Unbuckle that belt, slow and easy, Jeff."

Farradine reached for his gun suddenly, desperately, and four rifles sounded back and forth between the buildings.

The girl, Sarie, looked at Farradine's broken body and went back inside the house.

# The Crooked Nail

*He'd been on the owlhoot trail for five years, but he'd never stopped wondering about one thing: why that first robbery had gone wrong.*

DAN MORGAN passed new homesteads along the trail into Red Rock, weather-greyed soddies with frame uppers and oiled paper windows laid close behind sprouting cottonwood windbreaks; and approached the town with a sad, cautious feeling of riding on alien land. The old memories were gone now; all thoughts and smells and familiar faces long buried for a man with a five year's price on his head, entering his home town under night's protective cover.

He came up Main in full darkness, reached the last residential block and pulled over beside the latticed fence that guarded a green lawn and an old brown house. The elm tree grew solid and lasting on the corner, branches curving over the street, unchanged since he had last stood beneath the tree and talked with Linda. But she would be a grown woman by this time, concerned with mature problems; and his name and face would long be gone from her mind. He reined the dun beneath the elm tree and whistled once, a low and carrying sound that rose and died away strangely on his lips. He waited, expecting nothing, and ready to ride on, saw her running from the back porch, her form taking shape as she hurried through the gate and reached upward for his hand.

"Dan," she said. "I couldn't believe the whistle. Is it really you?"

"Didn't know if you were here," Morgan said. "Just had to whistle once, for old times' sake. Surprised, Linda?"

"I can't believe it," Linda Johnson said. "I thought —"

He remembered the night five years ago, walking along the river and talking bravely of the dreams he was most certain to fulfill. She was

BY FRANK O'ROURKE

sevénteen then, slim and leggy, with silky blond hair that came from her mother's Swedish ancestors, with the tall, strong body of her Danish father. She was too young for him to speak openly in those days; and now she was old enough and he was not the same.

"Have you changed?" she asked. "I can't see your face, Dan."

Morgan was grateful for the enveloping darkness that placed a soft mask across his thick beard and battered face; and concealed the inner thoughts and changes of a man who no longer possessed cheerful youth and innocence. He touched his dust-rimmed face and smiled with unhappiness. "We all change," he said. "I'm not the same, Linda. Don't ask how I've changed."

"Why did you come back?" she said. "Won't they —?"

"Wanted to see the country," Morgan said. "Maybe a last touch of homesickness."

"No," Linda said. "You were never homesick. There's another reason, Dan. Are you looking for the old faces? You won't find them."

"No other reason," Morgan said steadily, and then he had to ask, having no right. "Is there a lucky man, Linda?"

"I'm to be married next week," Linda said quietly. "To Rob."

Morgan tightened his hands on the reins. He should have guessed that Rob would wait and hope, and finally prevail. He said, "I wish you all happiness, Linda."

"I'll be happy," Linda said. "I'm sure. Will you stay awhile?"

"It wouldn't be wise," Morgan said. "I'll move on, Linda."

Then he could find no more words and he sat the dun in helpless silence, rubbing one worn boot against the

stirrup, until she stepped back and laughed unsteadily. "Good luck, Dan," she said. "In whatever you're after, I hope you find it . . . someday."

She went swiftly through the gate and across the lawn to the house; a door opened and closed, and the yard was empty. Morgan rode north from town, on the dusty trail, and wondered then if he had expected to find things unchanged, or was he so stubbornly dumb that he could not accept the inevitable changes of time. Riding on a trail that brought old memories with every turn and hill, he hoped that Lowell would have the answer not written in the letter.

Entering the homestead yard at midnight, Morgan dismounted at the gate and called, "Lowell!" and waited in the cold, damp night while his voice curled a thin echo around the house and up the back hill through the trees. He heard a floorboard creak as the door cracked open and a man said, "What you want?" and emphasized this statement with the following sound of a rifle butt scraping metallically on the floor.

"Put it down, you chicken-eater," Morgan said. "Come out here and give me a look at you."

The door came open with a bang and Lowell Slocum shouted, "Dan!" and came off the steps in a rush, to grab Morgan's arms and swing him around. "Dan, I figured you was dead for sure."

"Still kicking," Morgan said. "Let's put this horse away."

"Sure," Lowell said. "Sure, Dan. Here, I'll do it."

Morgan waited at the gate until Lowell took the dun to his barn, and then followed Lowell inside and stood by the stove, absorbing the faint heat. Lowell got his coal-oil lamp burning, raised the wick, and turned with a thin smile. He had grown fat and slack-cheeked, careless in his clothes, sly-eyed in a shifting, deeply secret manner. Morgan saw the first breakdown of his habits in the unswept floor, dirty table and musty-smelling bunk; and this was the home of a man who had made cleanliness a fetish in town, sweeping the floor twice daily and keeping his person immaculate. But then, Morgan remembered, he had often wondered if Lowell had been clean in order to hold his job, rather than for personal reasons. This change in Lowell was a worry, a feeling of distrust that nagged gently at Morgan's mind. He took the nearest chair and watched Lowell fumble over the coffeepot and feed corncobs into the firebox.

"Sit down," Morgan said.

"Just fixing coffee," Lowell said nervously. "We got five years to catch up on. You want a drink, Dan?"

"Sit down," Morgan said. "You wrote a letter, didn't you? All right, I'm here."

"But six months back," Lowell said. "I figured you never got it, Dan."

"It caught up," Morgan said.

"You wrote just enough to make me ride a thousand miles. Now talk."

Lowell broke down all at once, as if he had waited five years for someone to trust, and now could not believe his good fortune. He sat at the table and said helplessly, "Dan, when you and Mac pulled stakes that day, and we got no news, nothing seemed to matter for me. Rob stuck to his job and finally bought the store; now we don't see each other much. I quit the store and came up here on the old home place so I could wait for you or Mac. I never heard from either of you, and Bill, he just disappeared. Finally I got to thinking that Bill would come back if he was alive, and so would Mac, sooner than you would. They never came back, Dan. And then I started going over that last day and night, remembering everything that happened. The more I thought, the more I felt that Bill never went away at all."

"Damn you!" Morgan said roughly. "You tolled me up here because you *felt* something?"

"Wait," Lowell said. "Ain't that true? Bill would come back if he could?"

"That's true," Morgan said. "You knew Bill had the sack?"

"Sure, and that makes me think something happened. Dan, he'd never run with everything, not before he tried to get my share to me, and ask about you and Mac. I tell you, Bill never went away at all."

Morgan said, "Meaning what?"

"What you're thinking," Lowell said. "Listen, let me go over it so you'll remember too. You and Mac rode to Burkhart's. Bill stayed at his cabin like we planned, nailing up the side boards. Rob stopped by the store when I was alone, picked up the stuff, rode north to the cabin and left it with Bill. He got back to town, gave me the nod, and hung around the courthouse watching the sheriff's office. I closed up just before dark and rode north like you told me. I got to the cabin, nobody was there, grub and cartridges were gone. It was dumb luck I pulled back into the trees. 'Bout five minutes later the sheriff and half the town came helling up the trail. They cast about and found your tracks going west, and headed after you and Mac. I didn't know what to do, so I stayed put. Rob came along by himself and whistled. I answered. He told me that somebody, he never could find out who, rode into town after dark and got the sheriff, and the next thing he knew everybody was riding north.

"So Rob and me took a chance and looked under the bunk. The sack wasn't there. We figured right away that you three had got wind of trouble, took the sack, and lit out. We sneaked back to town and waited, and three days later they came in and told how they had a running fight with two of you, that was you and Mac, but you split up and got clear. Then Rob and me didn't know what to think. We just

had to wait. I moved up here soon as possible. Bill never showed. You never did. Mac never come back. You can guess what I started to think."

Morgan said, "That we sold you out."

"Don't say it that way," Lowell said. "I just got to wondering."

"Somebody sold out," Morgan said bluntly. "Mac and I hit the cabin late that afternoon. Grub and cartridges were there, Bill was gone. We figured he was on watch. We put the sack under the bunk, took the grub and shells, and headed west. They caught up two days later, we had to split and run, not wanting to hurt anybody. I got away. I've been thinking about that sack ever since."

"Somebody got it," Lowell said. "If you hadn't told me about that fella in Tucson, I never would have wrote. I just took a chance, rode a hundred miles north to mail the letter. Even then, I wouldn't have wrote if something hadn't come up six months ago."

"What?" Morgan said impatiently.

"Across the river," Lowell said. "I don't go to town much. Been riding over to the Big Bend store. I was laying down behind the counter one night, resting for the ride home. These fellas came in and started drinking and talking with Conklin. I woke up about the time Conklin went out to get a fresh jug. One of them said, 'You reckon we'll ever get another deal like that one?' And the other one answered, 'You shut up, that's only been four and a half years ago. Tend to your own business. If he wants us again, he'll let us know.' I never thought much about it for a minute, and then the first one laughed kinda mean and said, 'You sure don't get a cut of ten thousand that easy more'n once in your life.' And then Conklin came back and they left pretty soon. I didn't hear any more, but that was enough, Dan."

Morgan was thinking of the past, remembering the amount he and Mac had taken from Burkhart, ten thousand in government bonds. He said, "All right, Lowell. It might mean nothing, but it adds up."

"Then I did the right thing," Lowell said, "writing you?"

"Yes," Morgan said. "Let me sleep now. We'll talk more in the morning."

Lying in his blankets on the spare bunk, Morgan slept for several hours and then woke before dawn, unable to close his eyes, remembering the past. He had to examine the spent years and see himself and the others as they were that last fall. The town was wild, the country in a state of flux as the showdown between open range and homesteaders approached. Nobody doubted the final outcome; the river bottoms were too good for cattle and the town merchants knew this, held a secret meeting, and began the delicate job of appeasing the ranchers and courting the homesteaders, persuading the ranchers to

move back into the grass hills and avoid the war that was sure to break into the open.

And all this had meant nothing to five boys just turned men. They were about twenty-one, all of them, with nothing to show for their lives and work but a few payday dollars, some clothes, and meager equipment. Lowell's folks had homesteaded, and gone under the first year of the fight. Mac had lost his family in the flood; Bill homesteaded a section along the river but had no cash for farming or running a few cows. Rob Krenzein and Dan Morgan had nothing when they drifted into the country from opposite directions; whatever they saved went for living and a futile try at homesteading further north. Rob gave up and went to work in town, and Dan Morgan did odd jobs and helped Bill. They were together a lot that summer, having much time on their hands.

They had no real right to court Linda Johnson. Her father owned the bank, the livery barn, land around town; but she was not the kind who looked first at a man's purse. Perhaps Johnson understood it was a hopeless quest for them, with Linda so young, for he never objected to their calling, sitting on the porch, drinking lemonade, eating cake, and walking beside the river. Bill and Dan Morgan had the inside track, it seemed, but their courting was mostly the timid admiration of boys not quite turned men, conscious of their inability to offer anything solid. But they made her laugh, treated her with grave respect; and Johnson was always considerate and invited them to return.

They might have gone on in this manner, working out the ultimate destinations of their lives, if Bill hadn't learned the truth about certain events in a Front Street saloon one night. They knew the cattlemen had hired others to carry on the fight, burn homesteads, kill those who resisted; but they carried no personal grudge for such was custom and the land was wild and rough. But that night Bill learned the name of the man who burned Lowell's folks, who drove Mac's family into town, to a river shack, where the flood swept them away. The man was Burkhart, who lived forty miles north in the river bluff country.

Burkhart brought the long riders in, paid them, led them, did the dirty jobs for the cattlemen. And Burkhart, more cunning than most men of his stripe, took government bonds in pay instead of cash. Bill learned this from a man who was passing through to greener pastures, angry because Burkhart had paid him less than the going wage for that kind of work.

They took a month to work out the plan, scout Burkhart's place, fix the time element, and save the few dollars needed to buy a pack outfit, a better horse for Mac, cartridges in case they faced a running fight. Rob asked around town and discovered how to cash the bonds in a larger

town four hundred miles to the east; and they planned it so that Bill, working on his cabin, would hide the bonds until things cooled off. Then Morgan and Mac would take the bonds east and cash them in. Each of them, in his own way, considered his share and what it meant; the feeling of wrong never entered their minds. Burkhart was a killer who had worked within the law, living only to hurt decent people.

That day was vivid in Morgan's memory. He and Mac rode into Burkhart's yard at midday, got down and talked about nothing in particular; and making sure Burkhart was alone, gave him five minutes to produce the bonds. Burkhart made his break, as they expected, and Dan Morgan shot him as he leaped for the cabin, Burkhart's shots passing harmlessly overhead. They found the bonds under the floor, buried Burkhart in the grove, and rode south to Bill's.

When they pulled into the yard, Bill was gone. They had discussed this possibility, something that might be necessary if Bill was forced to cover for them in some way, so they left the bond sack under the bunk and rode west to the hideout. Two days later, while they waited for Bill, the posse came up and they had to fight and run. They split in the foothills and Dan Morgan, realizing then what he had done and the future life he faced, rode down the long trail; and now he was back, owning less than he had in those forgotten days, thinking of those men he had called his partners, of the men Lowell had overheard, and of Lowell who was not the same. Sometimes it paid a man to wait; the final showdown could be that much better.

Morgan woke when Lowell called him to breakfast. He ate quickly and said, "I want the names of those men. Can you get them, where they hang out, where they might be now?"

"I don't know," Lowell said hesitantly.

"You ride over to the store," Morgan said. "You find out."

"Where you going?" Lowell asked casually.

"Around," Morgan said. "Anybody on Bill's old place?"

"No," Lowell said. "Rob bought it two years ago. Won't allow nobody there but him and me. We hunt together a little in the fall."

"All right," Morgan said slowly. "I can't waste time. Somebody might spot me, then I'll have more trouble. You get those names."

Lowell said, "Dan, you've changed."

"Is that funny?" Morgan said harshly. "The way I've lived for five years? Nothing's too tough for me now, Lowell. If I haven't done it, I know how. You get those names!"

Morgan went to the barn and saddled the dun and rode along the back trail toward town, meeting no one and thankful for this luck. Coming in from the north, he turned the dun into the livery barn with in-

structions for good feed and a rub-down; and walked cautiously to the hotel. He was eating in the shadowed corner when Rob Krenzein entered and stared casually across the room, stopped in sudden amazement, and came over to take his hand and say softly, "Dan! Where did you come from?"

"South," Morgan said. "How you been, Rob?"

"Fine," Rob said, dropping into the vacant chair. "Dan, you know how long it's been?"

"Question is," Morgan said, "long enough for certain folks to forget?"

Rob gave him a close, unhappy frown, taking in Morgan's shabby clothes and clean, smooth-worn guns. Rob said, "No, Dan. Don't make any foolish move or loud talk while we're here. The hotel has changed hands. That beard fooled me for a moment." Rob looked again at his clothes. "Hard times?"

"I get by," Morgan said. "Anybody around I know?"

"Name 'em," Rob said.

"Lowell?"

"North of town," Rob said. "Getting by, no more."

"Bill," Morgan said. "And Mac?"

"Not a word," Rob said. "Not a letter. I've been waiting five years. I ought to have better news. Dan, you didn't come back to stay?"

"Depends," Morgan said. "What do you think?"

"They haven't forgotten," Rob said bitterly. "You'd think they would. I stuck, damn them, and made them stop looking at me like I was a dog or something. But they'll never forget. Sheriff's gone today, thank God. Anybody act like they knew you?"

"Not yet," Morgan said.

"Ride north to Lowell's," Rob said softly. "I'll come up tomorrow or next day, bring you a full outfit. I've got something on my mind. Had a detective outfit looking for Mac and Bill almost a year. I'll bring those reports, maybe you can read more than I can. You know what I'm thinking, Dan?"

"I know," Morgan said. "I'll be waiting, Rob."

"You sit here a minute," Rob said. "Let me walk out first."

Morgan had gone so long without a kind word or trust from any man, that Rob's friendship, unchanged after five years, shocked him fully awake to his old danger. He said, "See you, Rob."

He sat alone over his coffee, smoking, and finally walked slowly to the livery barn and rode from town. Ten miles up the trail, he turned east on the old path that led through the plum brush into the cabin yard. He dismounted and pushed through high grass to the door, and stood there for a long, silent time, thinking of the past.

The cabin had dried out and sagged since Bill cut the lumber and spent that fall working from dawn to dark, building a crude home. Morgan stepped inside and made a quick search, disturbing a thick film of

dust and chasing one grey field mouse across the warped floor to a knothole. Morgan remembered that last day, how their fine-sounding plan had fallen apart. Bill was nailing up the boards on the north wall when Morgan and Mac left for Burkhart's. Bill was to keep on working and wait for Rob to ride out with the cartridges and a bag of nails; and keep right on nailing up the north and south sides. And now the cabin was empty, rotting, and Bill was gone.

Morgan went outside and squatted against the south wall in the pale fall sunlight. He rolled a smoke and stared across the half-cleared yard at the river and the valley beyond. He stood then, in anger at his own waste of time, and rubbed one flat hand against the old boards, feeling the wind and rain-dulled smoothness. He stopped his hand suddenly, fingers back-tracking and moving along the board level with the windowsill. He looked down at the lower boards, and from them to the eaves; and felt the anger and sadness choke his throat.

He had come here to think of Bill, expecting nothing but the same doubt and bitterness, and stumbled over his answer. He walked along the south wall and felt certain, without doubt, knowing so much that had seemed unimportant. He rummaged through the cabin again, found a rusty shovel, and began the search that was certain to end in just one way. He went directly to the woodpile behind the cabin, shucked off his jacket, and started work.

The slabs and cut lengths of cottonwood and pine and one old boxelder tree had lain here through five years, turned brown-grey from sun and wind and rain. Morgan kicked the pile apart and worked downward to the moist, black earth in the center of the pile. He dug into the topsoil and went down four feet, into the gravel layer; the spade struck something and clanged dully. Morgan knelt, pawed with his hands, and lifted out the rusted belt buckle with the crossed spur design etched in the metal. A little deeper, working almost tenderly now, he found the rest: bones and pieces of clothing, the boots with the black linen thread sewed in rose patterns on each leg. He covered everything, repiled the wood, thrust the belt buckle into his jacket, and walked stiffly to his horse. He thought, "Take your time, Lowell. Bring the names back to me, but take your time." He had no spirit for the business he faced; but he did know how to finish it in the proper way. He spoke gently to the gelding and turned for the path, hoping that Rob had the promised outfit waiting. He needed that outfit now, for the long ride ahead.

Morgan made a wide circle to the east and tied the dun in a clump of trees behind the ice house on the edge of town. He wanted to see Linda Johnson once more, but that

was wrong, he had no right; and he could help her far more by riding away for good. He checked his guns and then walked up the alley toward Main, moving in night stillness touched by cool wind. He stood in the alley just off the street and waited patiently until the last customers left Rob's store. Women hurried away with small purchases, a man carried two milk buckets to his wagon; and finally the clerk, a young boy, called good night to someone in the rear and trotted south for home. Morgan crossed the street and entered, closed the door softly, and moved toward the office in the rear.

The bell jangled when he entered and Rob came from the office, pushing at his blue eyeshade, saying automatically, "Be right with you." Rob blinked then and said, "Dan!" and motioned quickly to the office. "Come back here, Dan. I've got an outfit all packed and ready. Was just deciding to ride up tonight."

"Lock up," Morgan said. "Wisest, Rob."

"Go on back," Rob said. "I'll cap the lights."

Morgan waited in the darkness beside the office door while Rob hurried through the store, turning off his lamps, locking the front door, and returning. In the office, Rob locked that door and smiled with relief. "Sheriff's back in town. Anybody see you?"

"No," Morgan said.

"Tonight at supper," Rob said, "sheriff was talking with a waitress. He wasn't sure, but he gave me a damned funny look. Dan, you've got to put distance behind you tonight."

"Intend to," Morgan said. "Soon as I finish what I came for."

"You seen Lowell?" Rob asked.

"Will," Morgan said thinly. "You got time to ride up with me? Kinda want him to see us both."

"I'll take the chance," Rob said. "Here's your outfit —" Rob lifted the bulging pack from the corner and placed it on the desk. "Now listen, Dan. After we go over these detective reports, if you smell something I missed, want to take a shot at finding them, you'll need cash. You name it, I've got it for you."

"Ten thousand," Morgan said quietly.

"Ten —!"

Rob gave him a quick look and chuckled. "Always joking, Dan. Be serious, will you. I've got five hundred here. Won't that do the trick?"

"Sit down," Morgan said. "Sit down, Rob."

"But —?"

Morgan gave him a sudden, sharp push, slammed him into the cushioned chair, and stood across the desk. "Ten thousand," Morgan said. "In cash or bonds, Rob. Or better yet, don't give me anything and make a play. That'll suit me fine."

He watched Rob Krenzein shake his head, stare in utter confusion, appear completely bewildered; but

the tiny, safely-buried fear was deep in his eyes. Rob said, "What do you mean, Dan?"

"I stopped at the cabin going up," Morgan said. "No reason. Just wanted to think of Bill once more. I rubbed against that south wall, level with the window. Bill was going to finish that south wall during the afternoon. You were bringing out more nails, Rob. Bill needed them. I know, because me and Mac helped him in the morning before we rode for Burkhart's. Bill figured he was about ten boards short of finishing that south wall until you came up from town. You got there, Rob. You shot Bill and buried him, then you went right on and nailed up those last boards."

"You're crazy," Rob said. "You're plumb crazy, Dan!"

"No," Morgan said. "Bill prided himself on his carpenter work. He never drove a crooked nail. If he did, he pulled it, straightened it, or used a new one. I counted fourteen nails drove crooked and smashed on down into those top boards. Bill never finished that wall. You did, Rob. And don't talk about Mac. He's dead. We split up, came back together, only he was shot and he didn't pull through."

Morgan pulled the rusted belt buckle from his jacket and held it in his open left hand. "Bill's. I didn't dig way down, Rob. You had a .44 then. Lowell never carried a six-gun. I reckon if we wanted to, we'd find a couple of .44 slugs down there. You shot him, you hid out and watched us come in and leave the sack and head west, then you took it and hit for town and made sure the alarm went out."

Morgan slipped the buckle into his pocket and waited calmly, hands low and steady, watching the man who had been his friend, the man who was marrying Linda next week; and, wanting to draw and square the books, knew there was a better way. He waited until Rob lost the false face of bewilderment and admitted everything with eyes and mouth and hands.

"I can't match you with a gun," Rob said. "You going to shoot me in cold blood?"

"I've been thinking of my life the last five years," Morgan said tonelessly. "I'm not proud of the things I've done, had to do, to stay alive and keep on the move. But you got less to brag about, Rob. You're worse than me. One thing sure, she's too good for you."

"You found out —?"

"She's too good," Morgan said again.

"All right," Rob said. "I'll bust if off, Dan. Listen, I can tell you how it happened."

"I'll do the talking," Morgan said. "You open that safe."

Rob did not move for a moment; and then sighed forlornly as he saw the curling hands over the gun butts. He knelt beside the safe and spun the dial, turned the handle, and pulled the heavy door back. He

reached into the big compartment for the gun and Morgan's voice stopped his fingers:

"Let it be, Rob. Bring out the cash, everything you got in there."

Rob transferred the canvas sacks to the desk, three of them, and the tin box with papers. Morgan said, "Now stand against the wall." He moved to the desk and inspected the box and sacks. "About four thousand," Morgan said. "Fair enough. Now you sit there, Rob, and write a letter to Sam Johnson. Tell him it was you that killed Bill, stole those bonds, helped me and Mac and Bill pull that deal on Burkhart. Tell him you can't do something like that to Linda, you're pulling stakes, and you want to deed everything you own to Lowell, and Sam is to take care of it for you —"

"No," Rob said. "I won't —"

"Take your choice," Morgan said, and waited.

Rob looked at him and sat quickly over the writing pad. He wrote three pages and pushed them away. Morgan read the statement and nodded soberly. "Now write Sam's name on the envelope and leave it right there on the desk where your clerk will find it. Now come on, Rob. Out the back door."

Rob Krenzein said, "Dan, you wouldn't —"

Morgan smiled then. "You're riding with me, Rob. We're going a long way and then I'll say goodbye to you. I'll give you fifteen dollars and your horse. That's what I had, Rob. I reckon that's the best way. You can't come back here then. Your face is goin' to look out at you from a post office dodger pretty quick. You'll get to know how I've felt for five years. That's better'n killing you, I think. You'll suffer longer, and that'll make life better for me. Go on, get out that door and walk quiet before me. We're birds of a feather, Rob. And she's going to be happy, and make me feel happy whenever I think of her, wherever I am. Go on, Rob. We got a long ride ahead."

# THIRST

BY JOHN PRESCOTT

*Reakor had killed the two men before they got him, but now he had to face the toughest enemy of all: the blazing, throat-choking desert.*

I

IN REAKOR'S mind the thoughts of pleasure which the sack of bank notes would give to him had begun to pale, and in their place was his consciousness of the roaring sun and of his increasing demand for water. And the vague and irritating lapses in coherent thought which the lack of water created.

He was sitting his Arabian loosely, with his head down, for he was afraid to raise his eyes for long into the awful glare of the Death Valley cauldron, or to the shimmering images of the Funeral Range still some five miles distant across the shifting sand. But occasionally he would shift his seared shoulders as gently as he could upon the plodding horse and squint backwards toward the

Panamints, from where pursuit might come. An unreasonable thing, though, he was sure; for it was June and no ordinary man crossed the Valley in the summer.

He did not want to think of Lawson and Cooke now, or anything that lay behind him, but the agony in his back and shoulders, the crusted streaks of salt and lather on the neck of the horse, and the slight puffing of his lips and tongue, lent an urgency to everything, and sought to turn his mind back to those things which he did not care to remember.

He had been in Darwin, Inyo County, indifferently considering some offers of day labor, when Lawson and Cooke had ridden in; and after the manner of a man who all his life had amounted to very little, and had prospects for nothing better, he was greatly flattered when the outlaws spoke to him.

His narrow, blue eyes had reflected the smallness of his being, which was not confined to his thin-shouldered stature and pinched face, and he had seen in his friendship with the pair an opportunity to raise himself above the poverty and anonymity which had been his lot.

In all his time in the mines of the Coso Range, or at the charcoal burners in the forests, there had been allotted to him only one small slice of fame. He had one time blundered upon an abundant spring of cool, fresh water in the Funeral Range across the ten-mile griddle of Death Valley; it had been purely by accident, a solitary grain of fortune in an unsuccessful attempt to find a lost mine. But he had seized upon its opportunities, brayed loudly of his find, and had always declined to give its position to any other who might be going that way. He had always hoped that there might be some profit in his knowledge.

It had happened just one day ago, but now with the pounding sun and the rising heat it seemed to him that it was in a different world. Except for the Arabian, which had belonged to Lawson, and the sack of money at the pommel, he could almost doubt that the men had ever existed. Only fragments of the last hours seemed to hold reality.

He'd known immediately that they were outlaws, and when they offered to share with him the loot from the Darwin bank in turn for his guidance to the Funeral spring, it did not surprise him or affront him. They had known their man, and he had waited a long while to put the spring to use. It was a fair price for the thwarting of pursuit.

Reakor tried to smile with the memory of those careful negotiations, but the discomfort was intense; his lips were swelling badly now and the tissue had cracked. His thirst was no longer a harrassment, but a physical pain, and though he had already consumed one of the three water bottles he could not keep himself from taking a strong pull at the second one.

He drank deep but did not give

any to the horse; for while its actions seemed to indicate that it was in need of some he had no interest in it other than its getting him over to the spring. It seemed strong enough for that, and since horses were alien to him anyway he would not mind the walk if it died then.

The bank haul had been easy and no trouble whatsoever Lawson had first bought him a buckskin horse, a miserable thing when compared with the Arabians, but because it was the first Reakor had ever had, and at no cost, he could not complain. They'd waited until evening, and shortly after sundown had entered the building where a payload for the Coso mines was being kept. Except for one moment, when Reakor, in his new-found power, had shot a surprised and unarmed watchman, it had gone off well They'd spent the rest of the night in riding for the Panamints.

There were parts of it that he could not recall too clearly They'd ridden hard that night and it had been an effort for the buckskin to maintain the steady pace and loping stride of the Arabians, and he had occasionally drifted back alone.

During one of these moments it had occurred to him that Lawson and Cooke were going to kill him when they'd crossed the Valley to the spring. It had been just an idle thought at first, but since such a course seemed wholly logical to his mind, it took root, and when they'd descended the eastern slopes of the Panamints to the edge of the Valley, he altered the order of events.

Those events were very sharp and bright. Even with the thirst, and the sun which seemed to beat down on his head like an anvil, these things stood out.

Very clearly he could see Lawson and Cooke easing their horses down the rockslides of the slopes ahead of him. There was a small, brackish water hole down there and they had all reined up and dismounted to water the horses and to fill the bottles for the crossing of the Valley. It was all sharp and detailed.

Lawson had reached into his saddle bags and removed some yards of sacking, which he took to the water hole to soak. Reakor had wondered about that and he had thought in that moment that something was happening that he should know about, but the opportunity which fell to him had been too great to miss.

Standing slightly shielded by the rump of the buckskin he had drawn the pistol and had pumped two slugs into the broad back which faced him less than ten feet away. Lawson had fallen straight down and forward into the cleft in the rock, and as Cooke swerved from his own bags, Reakor shot him in the chest. He had then shot the buckskin and Cooke's Arabian, and though a bit remorseful, because of the money involved, he'd known it would not be good to have them wandering back up the trail, or perhaps attract-

ing the eye of anybody going past.

These things, then, were far more clear than any other incidents, for in that moment of bloody murder he had known terror such as he had never known before; and a share of it lingered as he rode now alone across the desolation. He had always been a coward, perversely happy to stir up trouble, but never participating when it resolved in force and action, and his bravery at the robbery had been a sort of false courage engendered by the presence of the outlaws. But now he was alone with the heat, the endless burning ground and the horse that had belonged to Lawson.

## II

For some time the Arabian had been behaving very strangely, and his natural reaction to this at first was anger, not bewilderment. He had understood in a murky way that this horse was an animal of great endurance on the desert, and had evolved from a foreign strain admirably adapted to travel in arid lands.

But now he felt that he had been deceived. He had never before brought a horse into the desert, his previous experience being with the mules of other men, and he was resentful that this one was not living up to expectations. He had been riding all the time, but presently, as the wobble seemed to increase and the whole of the neck was crusting with foam, he dismounted disgustedly and began to lead it by the bridle.

And on the ground it was a different thing. The burning ache in his back and shoulders increased in agony. The baked earth and rock, which had reflected the enormous heat into his face, now transmitted it fiercely through the thin soles of his ancient, beaten shoes, and sent it in running fires through the bones and muscles of his legs. He stumbled and jarred over the black lava outcropping and sloughed tiredly through the sand and gravel, which gave no traction; and all the while he felt the brackish, gusty breath of the Arabian issuing from its foam-encrusted mouth.

He realized soon that the energy and salt in his body were ebbing fast. He had walked for perhaps fifteen minutes or so, and his thirst was unbearable. He was already into the second bottle, with some three miles and better yet to go, but he didn't have the strength to keep his hands from the cork. He swung it down from the saddle horn and drank until it ran in small streams from the corners of his mouth.

He was facing the horse while he did this and he saw that the animal was staring at him with an appeal which was almost haunting. He could see its strange, begging eyes, and the thick tongue which protruded grotesquely between its lips. The eyes were fixed strongly on the bottle and the water dripping from his mouth, and the tongue seemed to

have a stiff, flipping motion as the eyes beseeched him.

But he would not give water to the horse. He had already been hoodwinked and it was enough of a concession that he should walk as far as he had. He laughed at it, not entirely sanely, and took another pull at the bottle for its benefit.

Then as he looked at it above the bulge of the bottle it came near to him and nudged his shoulder; it opened its lips, and made a tremendous lunge at the bottle, knocking Reakor across the rock and gravel and sending the bottle flying to the ground, where it drained quickly into the parched earth.

Reakor came slowly to his feet and cursed the horse hysterically. He was a little afraid of it because of its lunge, but that was nothing compared to the rage which clutched at him. He shrieked at the horse and then grabbed the bottle by its long strap and swung it cruelly at the horse's nose. The horse screamed and tried to rear away, but Reakor seized the bridle and struck again and again with fury until he was exhausted.

When he stopped, the exertion had left him numb and dizzy. He stared dumbly at the terrified horse and his eyes traveled beyond it, across the vast, heaving seas of lava, sand and gravel, back toward the Panamints which shook and shuddered in the waving heat. He was on a high point there and the whole of the furnace bed lay beneath his eyes. And in the ashes something moved.

It was incredible, but something stirred. There was a slight movement, far, far back, midway between the Panamints and himself. Reakor squinted, his head pounding, and refused to believe it. He held his head firmly with his hands and stared again. Surely he was wrong. It was a trick of the desert; it was a mirage. But it was not. The something moved again, and it became two things, far away, but creeping forward in his track; two men on horses. And Reakor knew that he was being followed.

## III

The sheriff of Inyo County had not been in Darwin at the moment of the robbery and killing, but he had been nearby and had come to the scene with his deputy as soon as he was summoned. He was a medium-sized man of middle age, with an easy-going manner and a placid capability. He knew nearly everything there was to know about that part of California.

They spent a few minutes at the bank, learned that the stolen sum exceeded fifty thousand dollars, questioned the proprietor of the livery stable, who recalled the sale of a buckskin horse, listened quietly in the saloon, and before midnight took the trail for the Panamints. The sheriff knew the outlaws had a good two hour lead.

"Because Reakor ain't in town

you think he's with 'em," the deputy said, with an implied question, as they rode beneath the stars across the white expanse of the Panamint Valley.

"I think Reakor's with 'em," the sheriff said. "Hell, I know he is. Ain't just that he was seen around Darwin with them strangers, but because they could stand to have him around as long as they did. Ain't many can stand him for long. Only one reason; the spring in the Funerals."

"Lot of folks don't believe in that spring," the deputy said. "Lot of folks think Reakor was just spinnin' a tale; otherwise why wouldn't he tell others where it is?"

"Because it's the only thing he ever had and he aimed to keep it. Only thing he ever had to draw attention to himself. If he shared it with others he'd stop being different. Small men like that think strange."

"You think, then, he told 'em where it was for a share in the loot?" the deputy said.

"No, I don't think he told 'em anything like that. Reakor's not very smart, but he's cunning. He's cunning like an animal. He wouldn't tell 'em how to get there, but he'd show 'em. If he told 'em they might kill him, because then he'd be no further use to 'em. No, they need him to get across the Valley and to get the water on the other side."

For a long time they rode in silence, maintaining a steady gait in the Panamint Valley night. The trail they followed was a well-known thing to them — a way followed originally by the Panamint Indians to the water hole on the eastern slopes of the Panamint Mountains, and traveled occasionally by those whites who had the courage to cross the mountains and launch out onto the fury of the Valley.

The sheriff never doubted that this was the way which Reakor and the other two had come. The Panamint water hole was one of the very few sure supplies in the whole of the region at that time of year and he knew it would be necessary for them to stop there before setting out for the unknown spring across in the Funerals.

They talked for a while longer, a desultory conversation, and it died. They were well along the trail by then and getting into higher ground. The night was dark, there was no moon, and though the stars were big and lustrous they lent scant light once they had left the whiteness of the valley and ascended into the western spurs of the darkened hills. They traveled steadily, but slower now, resting the horses and walking afoot when the going was treacherous. It was long after sun-up when they came upon the bodies at the hole. The buzzards and coyotes had been at work and it was not a pretty sight. The deputy was a hardy man, but his stomach was sometimes weak. He nearly vomited.

"Gawd almighty," he said, blench-

ing, with the muscles in his face drawn tight. "It always gets me when I see them eyeballs that way."

"Good food for the buzzards," the sheriff said. "I don't know why it is, but they always seem to like them eyes."

They dismounted and picked their way forward carefully. The sheriff pulled the body from the cleft of rock. It had been lying face downward and had not been moved. Only the arms and legs had been gnawed.

"This must be Lawson," he said. "They say in town he was the boss. Looks like Reakor's the boss now."

"The horses too," the deputy said. "He got 'em proper. What a butcher! Even his own; he must've taken one of the others."

"Yes. One of the Arabians. Fine horses if used right. Fine for this kind of country. This thing had been planned fine; up to a point. They just didn't know their man as well as they thought they did."

There was a promontory of rock nearby which gave out on the great vastness of the Valley below, and the sheriff grunted and puffed his way to the top of that and squinted through the blazing heat into the distance toward the Funerals. It was a long while before he saw what he was looking for; the figures, almost motionless, inching forward across the heated inclines of the desert.

"Maybe two miles out," he said to the deputy. "Looks like we got a long day ahead of us." He came down from the rock and inspected more carefully the ground about the bodies again. He saw the open saddle bags and the sacking near the spring and near the body of the man named Cooke. "Maybe not as long as the one ahead of Reakor," he added. "Come on, we better get at it."

They had brought three water bottles apiece and they filled these at the hole where Lawson had fallen. Then they removed the boots of the dead men, and their own, filled them with water and fastened them to the pommels of their saddles. Since the sacking of the outlaws was so convenient they did not use their own, but took what had been left for them, soaked the material in the water hole and then bound it firmly to the legs of the horses, covering the limbs from the knee joints down, and slightly over the tops of the hooves.

This done, they remounted and put their horses into the winding switchbacks to the Valley floor, the water-filled boots jogging sluggishly at the saddle horns, and their stockinged feet already hot from the contact with the stirrup leather. The sheriff never doubted that he knew what he was doing.

## IV

As soon as Reakor was certain there was no mirage back there he became solicitous of the horse. He needed that horse now. He needed that horse more than anything in

the world. It was not enough any more for it just to get him to the spring; it would have to take him there and beyond to God knew where. It would be his only method of deliverance, a thing of priceless value.

Though it pained him in an unmeasured way to part with the third bottle of water he knew he had to give it to the horse. A moment ago he had smashed at the animal's nose ruthlessly, and now he was prying the stiff lips apart and forcing the neck of the bottle between them, watching jealously as the wide, dry tongue clacked about the bottle neck, and barely restraining himself from licking up the drops which dribbled from the horse's mouth. He hated the animal, but he needed it desperately.

When the water was gone he did not remount, but continued to lead it by the bridle. He had to conserve its strength in every way, he knew, and to further his own he removed his dragging gunbelt and hunting knife and secured them to the pommel beside the sack of money. He felt somehow that the horse should be grateful for these things; for the water and for his walking painfully across the ground that way, but he saw that it was not, that it was still afraid of him because of the beating. The great eyes seemed wider now, but they were full of terror and they never left him.

But still the horse was not right. Reakor had thought the water would revive it greatly, but he saw that it had not; it seemed only to have whetted its appetite for more, and there was none. Reakor had the awful and incongruously chilling feeling that he had done it all wrong, and that the horse might not even reach the spring. It seemed to be gasping more than ever now, and there was a strange sway in its walk. He did not know if it had been walking that way before or not because he had not paid it much attention, but he could tell that the legs seemed very painful, as though they were perhaps inflamed from the intense heat being conducted through the shoes and hooves and on into the legs. He felt deceived in the animal again and he wanted to yell at it, to shout at it and strike it, but he knew that would do no good. He was thinking lucidly about that now.

He talked to it. He'd never before in his life felt endearment for man or beast and he did not know how to speak sincerely in terms of affection. But he talked to the horse. He coaxed it; he tried to soothe it and to encourage it. He tried to remember some of the songs he'd heard the cowhands sing from time to time and he stumbled and mumbled over the phrases of these ballads in a giddy, sing-song voice. His mouth was very dry and swollen and some of the words would not go past his tongue.

Frequently he looked back at those who followed. Sometimes he

thought he could see them and other times he was not so sure. The land was so uneven and trembling; great waves of heat shook in the air and distorted everything he looked at. In that first moment of seeing them he had suffered the hallucination of thinking they were Cooke and Lawson, resurrected from the dead, and he'd nearly screamed aloud. Now that he was sure that was not so he seemed to be filled with a greater dread, for it was always the nameless and unknown which terrified him the most. It was not Lawson and Cooke, but it was someone, and that was enough.

But it was going to be all right now; he was sure of that. He was going to make it to the spring. The Funerals were only a mile or less away and already he could sense the rising incline of the ground. The going was harder and more fatiguing, if that was possible, and he could feel the added heat reflected from the rearing crags of the mountains; and the glare of the sand and gravel was intensified, so that his mouth and throat seemed filled with fire. But he was going to make it; it was in his mind, rolling and milling with the fevers of the heat and pain. He'd make it to the spring.

It was time soon to make his compass fix. He'd long flattered himself on having taken the exact location of the spring in such a manner so as never to run the risk of losing it. It was simple, really, but it was a point of pride with him. The compass was a standard miner's compass, with revolving card, an iron lid in which was placed a mirror catching the reflection of the numbers of the card. In the center of the mirror there was a slot, the shape of an arrowhead, and by sighting on a pre-determined peak he got his first intersecting line.

All this revived, a little, the sense of power, to know he had not failed in this. He was not far off. The peak lay impaled upon the arrowhead and the correction indicated on the card was something less than a quarter of a mile. He exulted; he shouted. He tried to sing again, but the words were too difficult to handle. He even grinned horribly at the horse, and tried to stroke its nose; but it reared in fright and he glared at it in anger.

He kept slogging forward with the bridle in his hands. He had new strength now. He would be at the spring shortly; he would be at the spring high in the rocks and when he was refreshed he would think of something. Perhaps he could create an ambush; he might be able to slink away. Perhaps they would never find him up in there.

The ground became more sharply inclined as he followed his line toward the intersection with the other. The exertion required for this final effort was staggering, sometimes causing him to reel and sway; and he had to check the compass often to make sure he was not veering from the line

The Arabian was wallowing in his tracks by then, and Reakor aban-

doned the cajoling and pleading, removed his belt from his trousers and lashed at the broad, white rump. He swung the belt in wide, flailing arcs with all his strength, but the horse seemed beyond that kind of pain, and its wavering, awkward steps were not affected. He and the horse were up in the rocks when his arm gave out, and he took the bridle again to lead.

They went forward over the flaming granite and Reakor was about to take another sight when the horse stopped moving. He turned on it slowly with dull rage and then he saw the ears raise up and the head lift high. He saw the encrusted nostrils twitching, cracking the foam and salt; he saw the dry tongue quiver between the yellow teeth. The horse lurched forward with eagerness; it shambled across the shelf rock and Reakor tottered after it to the spring.

## V

He lay on his belly on the hot rock slabs at the spring and drank the water. He closed his eyes and luxuriated in this ecstasy, and then he opened them and was sick all over the rocks and himself. But the sickness was only a minor interruption, and he plunged his head into the hole again and drank once more. He filled his hat with it and poured it over himself, over his head and his body, and he saw how quickly it dried on the slabs.

He lay flat down and drank the water again. He lay cheek by jowl with the horse, who was standing spraddle-legged at his side, and he could see how the water was drawn into the horse as by a siphon; how the cheeks were blown and how the foam and crust were gone from the silken nose. He saw the open inflammation and the running sores on the lower legs, and the curious splits in the hard bone and cartilege of the hooves. He had not noticed these things before and he was suddenly sorry and full of feeling for the animal. It was a strange feeling and it was alien to him, for he had never before felt pity for any living thing.

Presently he thought of the men in the Valley again and he raised himself, bloated and swaying, from the spring and pulled at the horse's bridle. But it would not raise its head; he pulled again, but his strength was vague and indefinite and his tugging had no force. He talked to the animal; he shouted at it. He begged, he cursed and swore, but it would not move. It spread its legs wider and stood upon them as though they were odd and unfamiliar parts of its anatomy, but it would not come away from the spring.

A small panic began in Reakor's middle and he dropped the bridle and scurried to the rim of rock which overlooked the Valley. The men were down there. They were very near, nearer than he had supposed. They were leading their horses onto the lower shelf rock and ascending toward the spring. He saw

them clearly; the two men and the horses. The horses had strange-appearing legs, but it defied his imagination.

He thought of the men coming and he thought of the pistol and how he would have to kill them. He could make an ambush for them there and shoot them as they came to the spring. He watched them very carefully until they disappeared beneath a protruding shelf of rock, and then he pushed himself away from the rim.

As he turned, the horse drew its head from the spring and he saw its glazed eyes bulging unnaturally from their sockets. He saw that the belly was distended with the water and that the animal trembled in great shudders which went through it entirely and into the legs and hooves. And he saw the front legs abruptly become rubber and buckle at the knees as the horse sank down; and then it lay on the slab of rock and rolled its wide and heavy back upon the money and the pistol, dead.

Reakor refused to believe this incredible thing and he ran to the horse and jerked on the bridle. He kicked savagely at the stomach and deep chest, and he threw himself on the rock and tried vainly to reach beneath the horse's back for the gun and the sack of money.

A voice which was not his own, but was his own, was screaming vilely at the Arabian, until, in a break in the obscenities, he heard the clatter of rocks and rubble below him. Then he flung himself up and began to run. In futile, wavering strides he ran in his sole-shot shoes up the shelf of rock.

Across the scorching surface of the shelf of rock he ran with puny, senseless steps through the blazing heat of the Funeral Mountains.

# GUNSMOKE Selects: A SIX-GUN SALUTE

*Mutual's Western Week— May 10th to May 16th*

**BY PARKE DWIGHT**

WAY back in 1950, someone at the Mutual Broadcasting System had an idea. The idea was not an earth-shaking one, nor did it herald the beginning of a new era or the doom of an old one. The idea was simply to acquaint the youth of the nation via the medium of radio with the daring, courage, and pioneering spirit of the men and women who were responsible for turning a wilderness into a prosperous land.

"Western Week" was established, and caught on in an impressive style. The broadcasting company devoted its kilocycles day and night to its Western tribute. Governors of Western states, Mayors of Western towns, station managers all over the country joined in the week-long celebration. A midwestern town of 10,000 people organized a huge parade complete with dazzling floats depicting scenes from the lives of famous Western characters. The station's personnel, from President to office boy, wore Western costumes all that week. One of the biggest theatres in New York conducted a costume contest for the best Western outfit worn by a youngster — admission and refreshments free. Everybody got into the act, and when it was all over, Oscar W. Chapman, then Secretary of the Interior, said, "In paying tribute to the hardy pioneers of the West's golden age, the radio is doing its share in preserving the picturesque traditions of this country." That was Western Week, 1950. Complete with Western Week Rodeos, steaks, cowboy entertainers doing shows for the sick and underprivileged, loud speakers blaring Western songs, schools, adult and juvenile organizations participating.

This year, Mutual's Western Week is from May 10th to May 16th, and it promises to be bigger and better.

The broadcasting company has scheduled shows designed to stir the pulse of every young cowboy in the nation. There'll be *Wild Bill Hickok* with Guy Madison and Andy Devine, *Sgt. Preston of the Yukon*, *Sky King*, Bobby Benson and others.

It will be an exciting tribute, and one well on its way toward becoming an American institution. And it will probably be repeated as long as America's youngsters want it — and it's hard to imagine that any of them will ever stop playing cowboy.

*Ellenwood was a quiet, gentle sort of man, and a schoolteacher besides. That meant trouble in a town like Moon Dance.*

# NEWCOMER

BY A. B. GUTHRIE, JR.

THE first man Lonnie Ellenwood saw to remember after the stage arrived at Moon Dance was Mr. Ross, the chairman of the school board.

The second was the man with the yellow eyes.

The first one stepped out and stood by the wheel as the driver checked the horses. His voice boomed up at Lonnie's father before they could get down. "Howdy there, Professor. I'm Ross. Glad to see you."

Ross stood as tall as a high-headed horse. He had a red face and bright blue eyes. "Howdy, Mrs. Ellenwood. How's Ohio?" He offered a hand to match the voice. "Hope you're going to like it here."

He stooped to shake hands with Lonnie. "Howdy there. Guess you're too young for your dad's new high school. Like to fish, Bub?" Lonnie smelled the evil smell of whisky on his breath. The man straightened and turned to Mr. Ellenwood. "We can go, soon's we get your plunder."

They stood in front of a frame hotel — Lonnie and his parents and Mr. Ross in a little group — and the grown people talked while they waited for the driver to hand down the baggage. A sign across the hotel said "Herren House." Another, below it, said "Bar." The other buildings along the street were wooden, too, and mostly one-story. The dust that the stage had raised was settling back.

A line of men leaned against the front of the hotel, watching from under wide hats. Lonnie saw curiosity in their faces, and doubt and maybe dislike for the new principal and his wife and boy. At first he thought the men all looked alike — weathered cheeks, blue or black shirts, faded pants — and then he saw the man with the yellow eyes. They weren't exactly yellow, though, but pale brown, pale enough to look yellow, yellow and cold like a cat's. Under his nose was a cat's draggle of mustache.

The eyes caught Lonnie's and held them, and Lonnie felt the quick pinch of fear, seeing bold and rude in them the veiled suspicions of the rest.

"Kind of raw country to you, I guess, Prof," Mr. Ross was saying, "but you'll get along." He took a cigar from the pocket of his unbuttoned vest and bit the end off it and spit it out. "Great country, Montana is, and bound to be better. We got a church already, like I told you in my letter, and now we'll have a high school. Yep, you'll get along."

Two of the men who lounged against the hotel were chewing tobacco, staining the plank sidewalk with spurts of spit. A swinging door divided them, and a sweet-sour smell came from inside.

"Preacher's a fine man, or so they tell me," Mr. Ross went on. "He figured to be here, only a funeral came up."

Beside Mr. Ross, beside the shirt sleeves and the open vest, Mr. Ellen-

wood looked small and pale, and too proper in the new suit he'd bought in Cincinnati.

Lonnie's mother wasn't paying any attention to the watching men. She looked up and down the dusty street, at the board buildings that fronted it, and at the sky that arched over. She smiled down at Lonnie and touched him on the shoulder. "This is our new home, son."

He didn't answer. He wished he was back in Ohio, screened in the friendly woods and hills, away from this bare, flat land where even the sun seemed to stare at them.

Mr. Ross was still talking. "I got a team hitched around the corner. I'll ride you over. Hope you like the house we got for you."

The stage driver had set the baggage down. Mr. Ross grabbed hold of a bag and suitcase and an old telescope and began walking along with Mrs. Ellenwood.

As Lonnie's father started to follow, carrying a box in one hand and a straw suitcase in the other, a man lurched from the door of the hotel and fell against him, caught his balance and went swaying up the street talking to himself.

When Lonnie brought his gaze back from the man, he saw his father leaning over. The suitcase had broken open and spilled towels and cold cream and powder and one of his mother's petticoats on the walk. Father was stuffing them back in, stuffing them in slowly one by one while blood covered his neck.

The men were laughing, not very loud but inside themselves while they tried to keep their mouths straight. Only the man with the yellow eyes really let his laughs come out. He was angled against the wall of the hotel, one booted foot laid across the other. His voice sounded in little jeering explosions.

Mr. Ellenwood didn't say anything. He went ahead stuffing things back into the suitcase and trying to make the lock catch afterwards.

Mr. Ross looked back and saw what had happened and turned around and walked back. His face got redder than ever. To the one man he said, "Funny, ain't it, Chilter!"

"To me it is," the man answered and laughed again.

Mrs. Ellenwood was standing where Mr. Ross had left her. Lonnie saw an anxious look on her face.

Mr. Ellenwood finally got the lock to catch. He picked up the suitcase, and they started off again, the eyes following them and then being lost around a corner. Mr. Ross didn't speak until they had put the baggage in the buggy, and then all he said was, "Sorry, Prof."

Lonnie's father sat quietly while Mr. Ross cramped the wheel around and got straightened out. "It's all right." His voice was even. "It doesn't matter."

Mrs. Ellenwood smiled at Ronnie. "I guess it's funny, to everyone else."

Mr. Ross grunted as if he didn't think so at all.

He came around the next day, the day before school was to open. "Like I told you," he promised Mr. Ellenwood, "next year we'll have a building, but the old hall'll have to do until then. You seen it? Everything shipshape?" He stood half a foot higher than Mr. Ellenwood. He was bigger, thicker, stronger, more assured. When he laughed he rattled the china that Lonnie's mother hadn't found a place for yet. He turned to Lonnie. "Your school don't start till next week, eh, Bub?"

He bit off the end of a cigar and lighted up and settled back in the rocking chair. "You're going to like it here, Prof. It ain't much, in a way, but in a way it is, too. Best damn people — excuse me — that ever lived, most of 'em. You'll see."

Mr. Ellenwood was nodding politely.

"Kind of rough, but you'll get on."

"Yes," Mr. Ellenwood said and waited for Mr. Ross to say more.

Mr. Ross took his cigar out and rolled it between his fingers. He studied it for a long time. "People'll take to you," he said slowly as if reading the words from the cigar, "soon as they learn you ain't being buffaloed."

"I don't know that I know what you mean."

"It's just a word, is all. Comes, I guess, because buffalo scare kind of easy."

"I see."

Mr. Ross squirmed in the rocker. He rolled the cigar some more, and then chewed on it and pulled and let out a plume of smoke. "Some maybe ain't used to a man teaching school," he said, not looking at Mr. Ellenwood.

"I see."

"You'll get on. Mostly it's women who teach in this country."

"Yes, that's true."

Mrs. Ellenwood came from the kitchen. She said good morning.

Mr. Ross lifted himself from the rocker. "Howdy, ma'am. Preacher been around yet, and Mrs. Rozzell?"

Mrs. Ellenwood nodded. "Yesterday."

"We liked them," Mr. Ellenwood said.

She put her hand on her husbands shoulder. "They insist Tom has to be superintendent of the Sunday school.

Mr. Ross nodded and smoked some more on his cigar. When he got up to go, Mr. Ellenwood stepped to the door with him. "We'll get on, as you say."

For what seemed a long time, Mr. Ross looked him up and down. Lonnie wondered if he saw a kind of chunky man, not very tall, with a pale complexion and sandy hair and the look of books and church about him, a man firm in the right but not forward, not hearty and sure like Mr. Ross himself.

"O' course," Mr. Ross said, "you'll get on." He put his cigar back in his mouth and closed the door.

It rained the next day, a cold, misty rain that drifted out of the

north. The air was still wet with drizzle that afternoon as Lonnie started out to meet his father on his return from school. The dirt trails that passed for streets were sticky with mud. At the crossings Lonnie hopped and skipped until he reached the plank sidewalk again, but even so he got mud on his shoes.

A little bunch of cattle was being herded down the street. He could see the horseman behind them, reining to and fro to bring up the poky ones and flicking at them with his quirt. The cattle had their heads stuck out, their eyes big with the strangeness of town, their mouths opening to a lost mooing. The voice of the driver as he herded them along came to Lonnie like a snarl.

For a minute he was frightened, seeing the cattle headed his way with their heads low and the long horns gleaming white, and then he saw his father and felt safe and hurried along to meet him. Mr. Ellenwood was walking with half a dozen boys and girls. They were students, Lonnie guessed. He saw his father lift his head and turn his face toward the horseman. The boys and girls stopped. The rider pulled up, held his horse for a moment, and then reined over.

Lonnie had got close enough to hear. The rider said, "How was that, schoolteacher?"

Even before he saw for sure, Lonnie felt his insides tighten. The man was Chilter of the almost yellow eyes and the cat's mustache beneath.

"I asked you to stop that cursing."

Chilter spit, then asked, "Why so?"

Mr. Ellenwood made a little motion toward the boys and girls. "You can see why."

For a while the man didn't say anything. He sat on his horse, curbing it as it tried to step around, and let his gaze go over Mr. Ellenwood.

He looked big, sitting there over everybody. "Why," he said, "I heerd this was a free country."

Mr. Ellenwood stepped out into the mud. He didn't speak; he just stepped out into the mud, his face lifted and his gaze steady.

The cat eyes looked him over. They traveled down the street to the cattle. Lonnie saw that the bunch was loosening. Some had poked through the open gate of a front yard. Some had started up an alley. A man came out of a door and called from the front yard, "Hey, you, haze these steers away, will you?"

Mr. Ellenwood said, "These are just children."

The eyes came back to him. They looked him over again, slowly, yellow and cold and scornful. The man spit and dug his spurs into his horse. It threw some mud on Mr. Ellenwood as it lunged. When it had run a little way, Chilter jerked it up and turned in his saddle and lifted his hat and bobbed his head at Mr. Ellenwood as if speaking to a lady.

Mr. Ellenwood pulled back from the mud. He kept silent, walking home, even after the high-schoolers had dropped away one by one. Lon-

nie wanted to question him but felt closed off. And when finally the words came to his mouth, he would see the man turning and lifting his hat, like saying, "Excuse me, ma'am," and anger or shame or the fear in his stomach kept them unsaid. All he managed was, "Mother said to tell you she was meeting with the ladies of the church."

At home Mr. Ellenwood changed clothes and went out into the back yard and began to split wood for the kitchen range. Lonnie sat on the steps and watched.

It had quit drizzling. In the west the sun showed red through black clouds. The sharp smell of fall was in the air, the smell of summer done and things dying, of cold to come, of leaves that someone was trying to make into a bonfire.

Lonnie's father was still chopping wood when Mr. Ross came clattering down the back steps. "Couldn't rouse anyone," Mr. Ross explained, "so I come on through, figuring you might be out here in back."

Mr. Ellenwood anchored the axe in the chopping block and turned to talk.

Mr. Ross bobbed his head toward Lonnie, and Mr. Ellenwood said, "You run in the house, son."

Lonnie backed up and lagged up the steps, but he didn't go in. He sat down on the porch, behind the low wall of it, and listened and now and then dared a look.

"Might as well tell you, Prof," Mr. Ross said, "that man Chilter's up to the saloon, making big medicine against you."

Mr. Ellenwood nodded, as if he expected it all the time.

"I don't know what to tell you."

"Nothing. It's all right."

"He's got a kind of a reputation as a bad actor."

"Oh."

"You got a gun or something?"

"I wouldn't want a gun."

"No?"

"No."

"You can't just hold quiet, and let him do whatever he figures on!"

"I'll just have to wait and see."

"I could stay with you, I guess." It was as if the words were being pulled out of Mr. Ross.

Mr. Ellenwood looked him in the eye. "Mr. Ross," he said, "a man has to hoe his own row, here or in Ohio."

"Good for you. I wasn't so sure about Ohio. I kind of wish you'd let me give you a six-shooter. I brought one along for you, just in case."

"No. Thanks."

"He ain't likely to use one. More likely to be fist-fighting or wrastling, no holds barred."

"Anyhow, you go on."

"I might hang around, kind of out of sight."

"It's not necessary."

Mr. Ross rolled his lower lip with his thumb and forefinger. "Damn if I ain't acting like a mother hen." He laughed without humor. "Good luck, Prof." He turned and walked away. Lonnie could see, before he

rounded the corner of the house, that his face was troubled.

Later, out of the beginning dusk, the man came riding. Far off, before he could see him, Lonnie heard the quick suck of horse's hoofs in the mud. They might have been meaningless at first, just sounds that went along with other sounds like the creak of an axle and the cry of children and the whisper of wind, except that already Lonnie knew, and his stomach sickened and the blood raced in him.

He wanted to cry out, wanted to shout the man was coming, wanted to scream that here he was, forever identifiable now by the mere turn of a shoulder and the set of his head.

The man didn't speak. He just kept coming, his horse's feet dancing fancy in the mud.

Mr. Ellenwood raised his axe and saw him and tapped the axe head into the block and stood straight.

The man rode from the alley into the unfenced back yard, and for a minute Lonnie thought he meant to ride his father down. Then he saw the hand leap up and the butt of the quirt arching from it. The quirt came down to the sound of torn air.

A weal sprang out on Mr. Ellenwood's face. One second it wasn't there, and the next it was, like something magical, a red and purple weal swollen high as half a rope. It ran from the temple across the cheek and down the line of jaw.

For one breath it was like looking at a picture, the horse pulled up, the quirt downswept from the hand, the weal hot and angry, and nothing moving, everything caught up and held by the violence that had gone before.

The picture broke into sound and fury, Father's hand shooting out and catching the man's arm and tearing him from his horse. The horse snorting and shying away and the man landing sprawled and gathering himself like a cat and raising the quirt high again while swear words streamed from his mouth.

Mr. Ellenwood was stepping forward, not back, stepping into the wicked whistle and cut of the quirt, his head up and his eyes fixed. There was a terrible rightness about him, a rightness so terrible and so fated that for a minute Lonnie couldn't bear to look, thinking of Stephen stoned and Christ dying on the cross — of all the pale, good, thoughtful men foredoomed before the hearty.

He heard the whine of the quirt and the two men grunting and the whine of the quirt and feet slipping in the wet grass and breaths hoarse in the throat and the sound of the quirt again.

All at once he remembered he didn't hear the quirt now, and he looked and saw it looping away, thrown by his father's hand. He saw his father's fists begin to work and heard the flat smacks of bone against flesh and saw the man try to shield himself and go down and get up and go down again. His eyes ran from

side to side like a cornered animal's. He began crawling away. Rather than meet those fists again, he bellied away, beaten and silent, and climbed his horse and rode off.

Mr. Ellenwood watched him, then turned and saw Lonnie, who had come off the porch and down the steps. "Son," he said sternly, still panting, "I thought I told you to go inside."

From a distance Mr. Ross's voice, raised in a great whoop, came to Lonnie's ears.

"I did — I mean I couldn't. I just couldn't."

Lonnie watched his father's face, wanting, now that he had won, to see it loosen and light up and the weal bend to a smile.

"You're pale as paper, son."

"I didn't know if you could fight. I didn't know if you would think it was right to fight."

Mr. Ross's voice drowned out the answer. From across the street it boomed at them, the words sounding almost like hurrahs. "By God Prof, you're all right!"

Mr. Ellenwood straightened and turned in the direction of the voice, and then turned back and looked at Lonnie and abruptly sat down on the step by him. "If a man has to fight, he has to fight, Lonnie."

Mr. Ross came marching through the mud, his big mouth open in a smile. "I saw it, Prof. I hung around. Damn me, if that ain't a bridge crossed!" He stuck out his hand.

Mr. Ellenwood took the hand and answered, "Thanks," but he didn't smile back. He looked at Mr. Ross and then turned his head.

Father was looking off a ways.

Mr. Ross said, "There's one man ain't going to be thinking education's so sissified."

Father nodded, looking back to Mr. Ross for an instant. "One," he said. "Just one." Then he turned his head again, and stared hard at the dim outlines of the town in the distance.

# The Killing at Triple

I saw the rider appear over the brow of the hill, coming at a fast gallop. He loomed black against the scrub oak lining the trail, dropped into a small gulley, and splashed across the narrow creek. I lost sight of him behind an outcropping of grey boulders, and when he appeared again it was right between the ears of the sorrel I was riding, like a target resting on the notched sight of a rifle.

The sorrel lifted her head, blocking the rider from view for a moment. She twitched her ears and snorted, and I laid my hand on her neck and said, "Easy, girl. Easy now."

The rider kept coming, dust pluming up around him. He was mounted on a roan, and the lather on the horse's flanks told me he'd been riding hard for a long time. He came closer, and then yelled, "Johnny! Hey, Johnny!"

I spurred the sorrel and galloped down the road to meet him. He'd reined in, and he stood in his stirrups now, the sweat beading his brow and running down his nose in a thin trickle.

"Johnny! Christ, I thought I'd never find you."

The rider was Rafe Dooley, one of my deputies, a young kid of no more than nineteen. He'd been tickled to death to get the badge, and he wore it proudly, keeping it polished bright on his vest.

"What's the matter, Rafe?"

He swallowed hard and passed the back of his hand over his forehead. He shook the sweat from his hand, then ran his tongue over the dryness of his lips. It took him a long time to start speaking.

"What the hell is it, Rafe?"

"Johnny, it's . . . it's . . ." He stopped again, a pained expression on his face.

"Trouble? Is it trouble?"

He nodded wordlessly.

"What kind of trouble? For God's sake, Rafe, start . . ."

"It's May, Johnny. She . . ."

*They wanted to hang the man who'd killed the marshal's wife — but the marshal wouldn't let them . . .*

**BY EVAN HUNTER**

"May?" My hands tightened on on the reins. "What's wrong? What happened?"

"She's . . . she's dead, Johnny."

For a second, it didn't register. I was staring at the drop of sweat working its way down Rafe's nose, and I kept staring at it, almost as if I

hadn't heard what he'd said. It began to seep in then, not with sudden shock, but a sort of slow comprehension, building inside me, the way thunderheads build over the mountains.

"What?" I asked. "What did you say, Rafe?"

"She's dead," he said, and he almost began crying. His face screwed up, and he began shaking his head from side to side. "I didn't want to tell you. I wanted them to send someone else. Johnny, I didn't want to be the one. She's dead, Johnny. She's dead."

I nodded, and then I shook my head, and then I nodded again. "What . . . what happened? How . . ."

"You'll see her, Johnny," he said. "Please, don't make me talk about it. Please, Johnny. Please."

"Where?"

"In town. Johnny, I didn't want to tell . . ."

"Come on, Rafe."

Doc Talmadge had pulled a sheet over her.

I stared at the white fabric outlining her body, and I almost knew it was her before I'd seen her face.

Doc stood near the table and reached for the sheet.

"It's May, Johnny," he said. "You sure you want to see her?"

"I'm sure."

"Johnny . . ."

"Pull back the sheet, Doc."

Doc Talmadge shrugged, let out his breath, and pulled his brows together in a frown. He took the end of the sheet in careful fingers, gently pulled it back over her face.

Her hair lay beneath her head like a nest of black feathers, cushioning the softness of her face. Her eyes were closed, and her skin was like snow, white and cold. Her lips were pressed together into a narrow line, and a trickle of blood was drying at one corner of her mouth.

"I . . . I didn't wash her off," Doc said. "I wanted you to . . ."

Her shoulders were bare, and I saw the purple bruises just above the hollow of her throat. I took the sheet from Doc's hands and pulled it all the way down. She was wearing a skirt, but it had been torn to tatters. She was barefoot, and there were scratches on the long curve of her legs. She wore no blouse. The bruises above her waist were ugly against the swell of her breasts.

I pulled the sheet over her and turned away.

"Where'd they find her?" I asked.

"The woods. Just outside of town. She had a basket with her, Johnny, and some flowers in it. I guess she was just . . ." He took another deep breath, "picking flowers."

"Who did it?" He turned to me.

"I don't know, Johnny."

"A posse out?"

"We were waiting for you. We figured . . ."

"Waiting? Why? Why in Christ's name were you waiting?"

Doc seemed to pull his neck into his collar. "She . . . she's your wife, Johnny. We thought . . ."

"Thought, hell! The sonovabitch who did this is roaming around loose, and you all sat around on your fat duffs! What the hell kind of thinking is that?"

"Johnny . . ."

"Johnny, Johnny, Johnny! Shut up! Shut up and get out in the street and get some riders for me. Get some riders for me, Doc. Get some riders . . ." I bunched my fists into balls, and I turned my face away from Doc because it had hit me all of a sudden and I didn't want him to see his town marshal behaving like a baby. "Get me some riders," I said, and then I choked and didn't say anything else.

"Sure, Johnny. Sure."

They showed me the spot where May had been attacked.

A few scattered flowers were strewn over the ground. Some of the flowers were stamped into the dirt, where the attacker's boots had trod on them. May's blouse was on the ground, too, the buttons gone from it, and some of the material torn when the blouse had been ripped.

We followed her tracks to where

the attacker must have first spotted her. There was a patch of daisies on a green hillock near the edge of the woods. The trail ran past the hillock, and any rider on the trail would have had no difficulty in spotting a girl picking flowers there. Beyond the hillock, we found the rider's sign. The sign was easy to read, with the horse's right hind leg carrying a cracked shoe. We saw the spot some fifty feet from the hillock, where the rider had reined in and sat his saddle for a while, it seemed. The dead ashes of a cigarette lay in the dust of the trail, and it was easy to get the picture. The rider had come around the bend, seen May on the hillock, and pulled in his horse. He had watched her while he smoked a cigarette, and then started for the hillock. The tracks led around the daisy patch, with clods of earth and grass pulled out of the hill where the horse had started to climb. May must have broken away at about that time and started into the woods, with the rider after her. We found both her shoes a little ways from the hillock, and the rider's tracks following across the floor of the forest. He'd jumped from his horse, it looked like, and grabbed her then, taking what he wanted, and then strangling her to death.

We followed the tracks to the edge of the forest, the sign of the cracked hind shoe standing out like an elephant's print. When they reached the trail again, they blended with a hundred other hoofprints to form a dusty, tangled puzzle.

I looked at the muddled trail.

"It don't look good, Johnny," Rafe said.

"No."

"What are we going to do?"

"Split up. You come with me, Rafe. We'll head away from town. The rest of you head back to town and on through toward Rock Falls. Stop anyone you meet on the trail. If you find a rider on a horse with a cracked shoe, bring him in."

"Bring him in, Johnny?" one of the possemen asked.

"You heard me."

"Sure. I just thought . . ."

"Bring him in. Let's go, Rafe."

We turned our mounts and started riding away from the woods, and away from the scene of May's attack. There was an emptiness inside me, and a loneliness, as if someone had deliberately drained all feeling from me, as if someone had taken away my life and left only my body. We rode in silence because there was nothing to say. Rafe looked at me from time to time, uneasy in my company, the way a man would be in a funeral parlor when the corpse was someone he knew.

We'd been riding for an hour when Rafe said, "Up ahead, Johnny."

We reined in, and I looked at the cloud of dust in the distance.

"A rider."

"Going like hell afire," Rafe said.

"I'll take him, Rafe," I said softly. "Get back to town."

"Huh?"

"Get back to town. I'll bring him in."

"But, Johnny, I thought you wanted my . . ."

"I don't want anything, Rafe. Just get the hell back to town and leave me alone. I'll take care of this."

"Sure. I'll see you, Johnny."

Rafe turned his mount, and I waited until he was out of sight before I started after the rider. I gave the sorrel the spurs, and I rode hard because the rider was out to break all records for speed. The distance between us closed, and when I was close enough, I fired a shot over my head. I saw the rider's head turn, but he didn't stop, so I poured on a little more, closing the gap until I was some thirty feet behind him.

"Hey!" I yelled. "Hey, you!"

The rider pulled up this time, and I brought my horse up close to his, wheeling around to get a good look at him.

"What's your hurry, mister?" I asked.

He was tall and rangy, and he sat his saddle with the practiced ease of years of experience. He wore a grey hat pulled low over his eyes, and a shock of unruly brown hair spilled from under his hat onto his forehead. A blue bandana was knotted around his throat, and his shirt and trousers were covered with dust and lather.

"What's it to you?" he asked. His voice was soft, mildly inquisitive, not in the least offensive.

"I'm the marshal of Triple Tree."

"So?"

"You been through town lately?"

"Don't even know where your town is," he said.

"No?"

"Nope. Why? Somebody rob a bank or something?"

"Something," I said. "Want to get off your mount?" He was riding a sorrel that could have been a twin to my own horse.

"Nope, can't say that I do. Suppose you tell me what's on your mind, marshal?"

"Suppose I don't."

The rider shrugged. He wasn't a bad looking fellow, and a half-smile lurked at the corners of his mouth and in the depths of his blue eyes. "Marshal," he said, "this here's a free country. You don't want to tell me what you're all het up about, that's fine with me. Me, I'll just mosey along and forget I ever . . ."

"Just a second, mister."

"Yes, marshal?" He moved his hands to his saddle horn, crossed them there. He wore a single Colt .44 strapped to his waist, the holster tied to his thigh with a leather thong.

"Where are you bound?"

"Nowheres in particular. Down the road a piece, I suppose. Might be able to pick up some work there. If not, I'll ride on a little more."

"What kind of work?"

"Punching. Cattle drive. Shoveling horse manure or cow dung. I ain't particular."

"How come you didn't ride through Triple Tree?"

"I crossed over the mountains yonder," he said. "Spotted the trail and headed for it. Any law against that?"

"What's your name?"

The rider smiled. "Jesse James. My brother Frank's right behind that tree there."

"Don't get funny," I told him. "I'm in no mood for jokes."

"You *are* in a pretty sour mood, ain't you, marshal?" He wagged his head sorrowfully. "Something you et, maybe?"

"What's your name, mister?"

"Jack," he said simply, drawling the word.

"Jack what?"

"Hawkins. Jack Hawkins."

"Get off your horse, Hawkins."

"Why?"

I was through playing games. I cleared leather and rested the barrel of my gun on my saddle horn. "Because I say so. Come on, swing down."

Hawkins eyed the .44 with respect. "My, my," he said. He swung his long legs over the saddle, and looked at the gun again. "My!"

"You better drop your gun belt, Hawkins."

Hawkins' eyes widened a bit. "I'll bet a bank *was* robbed," he said. "Hell, marshal, I ain't a bank robber." He loosened his belt and dropped the holstered .44 to the road.

"Back away a bit."

"How far, marshal?"

"Listen . . ."

"I just asked . . ."

I fired two shots in quick succession, both plowing up dirt a few inches from his toe boots.

"Hey!"

"Do as I say, goddamnit!"

"Sure, sure." A frown replaced the smile on his face, and he stood watching me tight-lipped.

I walked around the side of his horse and lifted the right hind hoof. I stared at it for a few seconds, and then dropped it to the dust again.

"Where's her shoe?" I asked.

"On her hoof," Hawkins replied. "Where the hell do you suppose it would be?"

"She's carrying no shoe on that hoof, Hawkins."

He seemed honestly surprised. "No? Must have lost it. I'll be damned if everything doesn't happen to me."

"Was the shoe cracked? Is that why she lost it?"

"Hell, no. Not that I know of."

I looked at him, trying to read meaning in the depths of his eyes. I couldn't tell. I couldn't be sure. A horse could lose a shoe anytime. That didn't mean it was carrying a cracked shoe, before the shoe got lost.

"You better mount up," I said.

"Why?"

"We're taking a little ride back to Triple Tree."

"You intent on pinning that bank job on me, ain't you? Marshal, I ain't been in a bank in five years."

"How long is it since you've been in the woods?"

"What?"

"Mount up!"

Hawkins cursed under his breath and reached for his gun belt in the dust.

"I'll take care of that," I said. I hooked it with my toe and pulled it toward me, lifting it and looping it over my saddle horn.

Hawkins stared at me for a few seconds, then shook his head and swung into his saddle. "Here goes another day shot up the behind," he said. "All right, marshal, let's get this goddamned farce over with."

The town was deserted.

The afternoon sun beat down on the dusty street with fierce intensity. The street was lonely, and we rode past the blacksmith shop in silence, past the saloon, past the post office, past my office, up the street with the sound of our horses' hooves the only thing to break the silence.

"Busy little town you got here," Hawkins said.

"Shut up, Hawkins."

He shrugged. "Whatever you say, marshal."

The silence was strange and forbidding. It was like walking in on someone who'd been talking about you. It magnified the heat, made the dust swirling up around us seem more intolerable.

When the voice came, it shattered the silence into a thousand brittle shards.

"Marshal! Hey, marshal!"

I wheeled the sorrel and spotted old Jake Trilby pushing open the batwings on the saloon. He waved and I walked the horse over to him, waiting while he put his crutch under his arm and stepped out onto the boardwalk.

"Where is everyone, Jake?"

"They got him, marshal," he said. "The feller killed your wife."

"What?"

"Yep, they got him. Caught him just outside of Rock Falls. Ridin' a horse with a cracked right hind shoe. Had blood on his clothes, too. He's the one, all right, marshal. He's the one killed May, all right."

"Where? Where is he?"

"They didn't wait for you this time, marshal. They knowed you wanted action."

"Where are they?"

"Out hangin' him. If he ain't hanged already by this time." Old Jake chuckled. "They're givin' it to him, marshal. They're showin' him."

"Where, Jake?"

"The oak down by the fork. You know where. Heck, marshal, he's dancin' on air by now."

I turned the sorrel and raked my spurs over her belly. She gave a leap forward, and as we rode past Hawkins, I tossed him his gun belt. A surprised look covered his face, and then I didn't see him any more because he was behind me, and I was heading for the man who killed her.

I saw the tree first, reaching for the sky with heavy branches. A rope had been thrown over one of those

branches, and it hung limply now, its ends lost in the milling crowd beneath the tree. The crowd was silent, a tight knot of men and women forming the nucleus, a loose unraveling of kids on the edges. I couldn't see the man the crowd surrounded until I got a little closer. I pushed the sorrel right into the crowd and it broke apart like a rotten apple, and then I saw the man sitting the bay under the tree, his hands tied behind him, the rope knotted around his neck.

"Here's Johnny," someone shouted, and then the cry seemed to sweep over the crowd like a small brush fire. "Here's Johnny."

"Hey, Johnny!"

"We got him, Johnny!"

"Just in time, Johnny!"

I swung off the horse and walked over to where Doc Talmadge was pulling the rope taut.

"Hello, Johnny," he said, greeting me affably. "We got the bastard, and this time we didn't wait for you. Another few minutes and you'd have missed it all."

"Put that rope down, Doc," I said.

Doc's eyes widened and then blinked. "Huh? What, Johnny?"

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"I was just fixin' to tie the rope around the trunk here. After that, we going to take that horse from underneath this sonova . . ."

"What's the matter, Johnny?" someone called.

"Come on, Johnny," another voice prodded. "Let's get on with this."

The sky overhead was a bright blue, and the sun gleamed in it like a fiery eye. It was a beautiful day, with a few clouds trailing wisps of cotton close to the horizon. I glanced up at the sky and then back to the man sitting the bay.

He was narrow faced, with slitted brown eyes and jaws that hadn't been razor-scraped in days. His mouth was expressionless. Only his eyes spoke, and they told of silent hatred. His clothes were dirty, and his shirt was spattered with blood.

I walked away from Doc, leaving him to knot the rope around the tree trunk. The crowd fell silent as I approached the man on the bay.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Dodd," he said.

"This your horse?"

"Yep."

I walked around behind the horse and checked the right hind hoof. The shoe was cracked down the center. I droped the hoof and walked back to face Dodd.

I stared at him for a few minutes, our eyes locked. Then I turned to the crowd and said, "Go on home. Go on. There'll be no hanging here today."

Rafe stepped out of the crowd and put his hands on his hips. "You nuts, Johnny? This is the guy who killed May. He killed your wife!"

"We don't know that," I said.

"We don't know it? Jesus, you

just saw the broken shoe. What the hell more do you want?"

"He's got blood all over his shirt, Johnny," Doc put in. "Hell, he's our man."

"Even if he is, he doesn't hang," I said tightly.

An excited murmur went up from the crowd and then Jason Bragg shouldered his way through and stood in front of me, one hand looped in his gun belt. He was a big man, with corn yellow hair and pale blue eyes. He was a farmer with a wife and three grown daughters. When he spoke now, it was in slow and measured tones.

"Johnny, you are not doing right."

"No, Jason?"

Jason shook his massive head, and pointed up to Dodd. "This man is a killer. We know he's a killer. You're the marshal here. It's your job to . . ."

"It's my job to do justice."

"Yes, it's your job to do justice. It's your job to see that this man is hanged!" He looked at me as if he thought I was some incredible kind of insect. "Johnny, he killed *your own wife!*"

"That doesn't mean we take the law into our own hands."

"Johnny . . ."

"It doesn't mean that this town will get blood on its hands, either. If you hang this man, you'll all be guilty of murder. You'll be just as much a killer as he is. Every last one of you! You'll be murdering in a group, but you'll still be murdering. You've got no right to do that."

"The hell we ain't!" someone shouted.

"Come on, Johnny, quit the goddamned stalling!"

"What is this, a tea party?"

"We got our man, now string him up!"

"That's the man killed your wife, Johnny."

Jason Bragg cleared his throat. "Johnny, I got a wife and three girls. You remember my daughters when they were buttons. They're young ladies now. We let this one get away with what he's done, and this town won't be safe for anyone any more. My daughters . . ."

"He won't get away with anything," I said. "But you're not going to hang him."

"He killed your wife!" someone else shouted.

"He's ridin' the horse that made the tracks."

"Shut up!" I yelled. "Shut up, all of you!"

There was an immediate silence, and then, cutting through the silence like a sharp-edged knife, a voice asked, "You backin' out, marshal?"

The heads in the crowd turned, and I looked past them to see Hawkins sitting his saddle on the fringe of the crowd.

"Keep out of this, stranger," I called. "Just ride on to wherever the hell you were going."

"Killed your wife, did he?" Hawkins said. He looked over to

Dodd, and then slowly began rolling a cigarette. "No wonder you were all het up back there on the trail."

"Listen, Hawkins . . ."

"You seemed all ready to raise six kinds of hell a little while ago. What's the matter, a hangin' turn your stomach?"

The crowd began to murmur again, and Hawkins grinned.

"Hawkins," I started, but he raised his voice above mine and shouted, "Are you sure this is the man?"

"Yes!" the crowd yelled. "Yes!"

"Ain't no two ways about it. He's the one! Even got scratches on his neck where May grabbed at him."

I glanced quickly at Dodd, saw his face pale, and saw the deep fresh scratches on the side of his neck at the same time.

"Then string him up!" Hawkins shouted. "String him higher'n the sun! String him up so your wives and your daughters can walk in safety. String him up even if you've got a yellow-livered marshal who . . ."

"String him up!" the cry rose.

The crowd surged forward and Doc Talmadge brought his hand back to slap at the bay's rump. I took a step backward and pulled my .44 at the same time. Without turning my back to the crowd, I swung the gun down, chopping the barrel onto Doc's wrist. He pulled back his hand and let out a yelp.

"First man moves a step," I said, "gets a hole in his gut!"

Jason Bragg took a deep breath. "Johnny, don't try to stop us. You should be ashamed of yourself. You should . . ."

"I like you, Jason," I said. "Don't let it be you." I cocked the gun, and the click was loud in the silence.

"Johnny," Rafe said, "you don't know what you're doing. You're upset, you're . . ."

"Stay where you are, Rafe. Don't move an inch."

"You going to let him stop you?" Hawkins called.

No one answered him.

"You going to let him stop justice?" he shouted.

I waited for an answer, and when there was none, I said, "Go home. Go back to your homes. Go back to your shops. Go on, now. Go on."

The crowd began to mumble, and then a few kids broke away and began running back to town. Slowly, the women followed, and then Jason Bragg turned his back to me and stumped away silently. Rafe looked at me sneeringly and followed the rest. Doc Talmadge was the last to go, holding his wrist against his chest.

Hawkins sat his sorrel and watched the crowd walking back to town. When he turned, there was a smile on his face.

"Thought we were going to have a little excitement," he said.

"You'd better get out of town, Hawkins. You'd better get out damned fast."

"I was just leavin', marshal." He

raised his hand in a salute, wheeled his horse, and said, "So long, chum."

I watched while the horse rode up the dusty trail, parting the walkers before it. Then the horse was gone, and I kept watching until the crowd turned the bend in the road and was gone, too.

I walked over to Dodd.

He sat on the bay with his hands tied behind him, his face noncommittal.

"Did you kill her?" I asked.

He didn't answer.

"Come on," I said. "You'll go before a court anyway, and there's no one here but me to hear a confession. Did you?"

He hesitated for a moment, and then he nodded briefly.

"Why?" I asked.

He shrugged his thin shoulders.

I looked into his eyes, but there was no answer there, either.

"I appreciate what you done, marshal," he said suddenly, his lips pulling back to expose narrow teeth. "Considering everything . . . well, I just appreciate it."

"Sure," I said. "I'm paid to see that justice is done."

"Well, I appreciate it."

I stepped behind him and untied his hands, and then I loosened the noose around his neck.

"That feels good," he said, massaging his neck.

"I'll bet it does." I reached into my pocket for the makings. "Here," I said, "roll yourself a cigarette."

"Thanks. Say, thanks."

His manner grew more relaxed. He sat in the saddle and sprinkled tobacco into the paper. He knew better than to try a break, because I was still holding my .44 in my hand. He worked on the cigarette, and he asked, "Do you think . . . do you think it'll go bad for me?"

I watched him wet the paper and put the cigarette into his mouth.

"Not too bad," I said.

He nodded, and the cigarette bobbed, and he reached into his pocket for a match.

I brought the .44 up quickly and fired five fast shots, watching his face explode in soggy red chunks.

He dropped out of the saddle.

The cigarette falling to the dust beside him.

Then I mounted up and rode back to town.

# Old Chief's Mountain

*The old Chief said he knew the right mountain, and two of the men believed him. But Bronson was too smart to trust a lousy Injun.*

**BY BRYCE WALTON**

YOUNG GERALD BRONSON, Private First Class, thought about how funny it was. How the three of them looked the same now. Nobody older or younger.

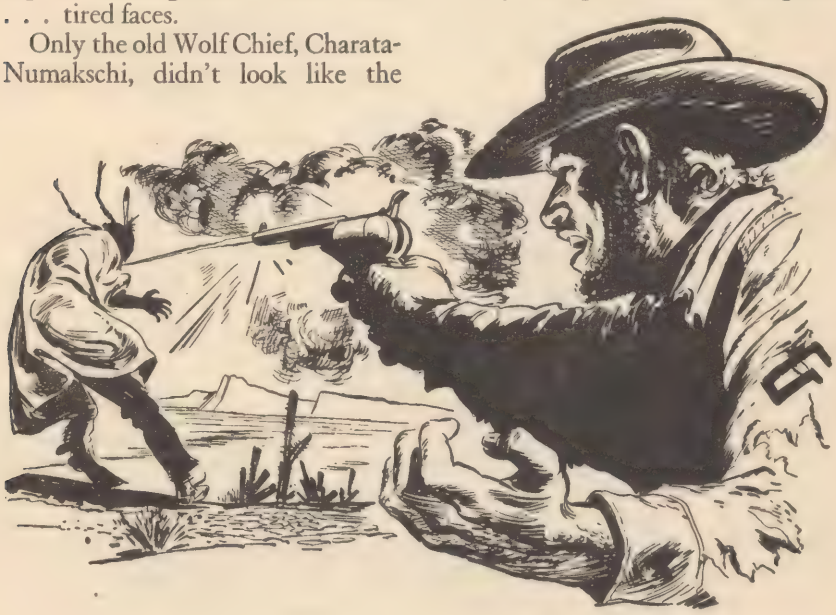
No difference in rank that anyone could notice. The blue uniforms faded and dusty and torn. Faces burning, blistered, peeled, blackening, all looking alike. Men's faces . . . tired faces.

Only the old Wolf Chief, Charata-Numakschi, didn't look like the other three. He was just the same as he'd been the first time Bronson had ever seen him.

The three soldiers and the Indian lay behind the boulder, but it was no shelter.

Bronson remembered that first time.

They had stopped to rest, and to try to get back strength,



but there was no resting. At night they hugged the sand and the stones, hugged the heat they had hated during the day, praying for it to stay, but it didn't stay long and at night they shivered and their bones rattled. There was no shelter anywhere.

The sun reflected heat from the rock as from a furnace slab. A bleached skull looked up hollowly at them. Bronson kept staring back at it with a peculiar fascination.

Bronson had enormous hungry eyes, a face lean and angular as an Egyptian death mask, and a body that seemed to be boned with brittle glass rods. His lips, that had always been fairly blistered with the need for love, were now swollen and cracked.

Once in a while he would say to the two older men, "I don't mind dyin'. I ain't scared of it. What I hate is — I never did get myself an Injun!"

Then he would touch the scabbed crease above his right ear where an Apache lance had singed his scalp. It had knocked him unconscious. Later he had awakened, and the Indians were all dead. The First Dragoons were all dead too, except himself, and Sloane and Billingsley. And the old Indian scout. Not another Indian anywhere left alive. And young Bronson hadn't gotten to fire one shot, not even one.

Once in a while one of them would ask the Indian: "You sure we're going right, Wolf Chief?"

And Numakschi would answer without looking back. "I know. Keep straight. Reach Mountain. Little lake. Sweet water. Trees. Not far. Mountain with top like horn of goat."

And the three men would stop and look. They could see that mountain all right. The peak curved like a goat's horn. Bronson would stare and realize that his eyes were burned so that he no longer trusted what he saw.

Bronson sat there on the stove-hot sand and stared at the bleached skull.

"We'd be about in the middle of the sink now, wouldn't we, Wolf Chief?" Billingsley asked.

Numakschi nodded his lizard-hued face.

"But they's mountains all around," Bronson said. "How can you be sure, Injun? Which mountain's the right one?"

Numakschi shrugged. "Like goat horn. Sweet water. Sweet clear cool water — cool to tongue —"

"Shut up!" screamed Bronson, all at once. His fingers burned into sand and he was there on his knees glaring at the Indian. "You don't have to describe nothin'! I can't stand you to blab about the water no more!"

Colonel Sloane of Boston, late Commander of the Garrison at Fort Lomax in Arizona, touched the skull, then jerked his hand away.

"By God," he whispered. "My finger sizzled when I touched that bone! You hear my finger sizzle?"

Lieutenant Billingsley of Phila-

delphia, later of Kansas City and recently of the Dragoons, looked at the skull too, then slid back tight up against the boulder. He flinched, then heaved his body around and stared reproachfully at the boulder.

"It burned me," he whispered. Deep cracks ran perpendicular from his lips and kept breaking open and bleeding. His lips had the wrinkled pouting cupid look of a very old man's mouth.

Bronson sneered furtively. He'd put a lot of faith in army officers, leaders of men. It wasn't there any more. They weren't like officers any more, nor leaders. They were both as scared as he was. They weren't even soldiers now.

Only old Numakschi wasn't scared. Wasn't tired. Wasn't needing water. Wasn't feeling tired, heat or fear. Wasn't even a human being. Just an old Apache Devil; and nothing ever bothered an Indian. They didn't have any feelings.

Sloane wasn't even big and fat any more. The heat had burned him down like a piece of side-pork frying, simmering and shrinking up into lean brown leatheriness. He doesn't act like God-almighty any more, Bronson thought, with his riding crop slapping against his red-striped pants and his shiny boots. He doesn't smile any more like he did when he found a speck of dust on Bronson's shoe and slapped him in the brig for a week.

Colonel Sloane didn't look like a colonel. And Lieutenant Billingsley, thin and weak-chinned and faded-eyed, didn't look like a lieutenant. All three of the soldiers seemed to Bronson to have changed so much that they all looked alike.

But the sink and the sun hadn't changed old Numakschi at all.

They were walking again. Swoooosssh. Swoooosssh. Feet sliding through sand, slipping, teetering uncertainly on softness and the unexpected hardness of hidden stones.

Bronson's throat ached with heat and hunger. His throat had swollen dry and there was a painful tension in his chest as he plodded dully behind the others, always looking and thinking about the old Indian up there in front, where he kept always a steady pace and a certainty none of the others seem to have.

Incidents, unpleasant fragments of his life, churned turgidly in Bronson's brain like a pot of thick stew coming to a boil.

*Work.*

Work—work—working—working. Sometimes a whole life, short like his, or long like others, could be a word. *Work.*

Working from the time he could walk or run around the cabin in the cleared land, beating at the mule and dragging desperately at the heavy plough . . . working the sun up and working it down . . . his father beating him bleeding and senseless with the thick, heavy harness strap when things didn't go right. They never had seemed to go right, not as long as Bronson could remember.

His bean-pole mother with haunted eyes that had cried a few times and then dried up and finally closed for good when the fever came once too often.

The cabin squatting in the wet ground, its squared logs dark with the night's rain, the dogs sniffing at corners and running out to bark . . . no strangers trusted . . . no visitors much . . . lonely and afraid of Indians waiting out in the brush six miles out of Independence.

Everytime something didn't go right, the harness strap. And everytime there was an Indian scare, or too much rain, or not enough rain, or the mule wouldn't move, or something — there would be the harness strap at night, rising and falling, and his father's face over him in shadows, all twisted and crazy with something — demons maybe, or fever, or some hate he couldn't get rid of any other way.

But it had always been worse when the Indian scare got going through the woods and around the hills. A Crow was seen slipping along through brush, and everyone locked the door and waited with a shotgun, and then, always, it ended up with the harness strap because Gerald didn't act right.

It was the Indians' fault. Everything had been back there. Everybody knew back there that once they got rid of those Indians things would be a lot better.

At twelve, young Bronson was as strong, people said, as a razorback hog. Clumsy, awkward, bitter sometimes, wanting to get away, wanting to see his beard get stiff, wanting his body to get big enough to fit his big feet, and his father laughing at him and telling him he wasn't big and he wasn't a baby either. He wasn't young or old. Too old to suck and too young to die.

Bronson shook his head and faced the sand. It was in his eyes, caked inside his nose and ears, scaled to his scalp. He concentrated on his feet and watched them rise and fall. But then he always looked up and defied the sun and stared at the old Indian up there in front.

Fatigue was alive and throbbing in their backs, in the exhausted hamstrings of their thighs. Under the burnished metallic heat of the sun, strength and will kept going out with their sweat. They moved stupidly, sweat blinding their eyes, tongues clapped against dry enraged palates, legs quivering.

"Wolf Chief," Sloane sighed. "You sure —?"

"I sure," Numakschi said without looking back. "See little draw. Then go round a rock. I remember. One falls into spring. Grass all round. Cool. Little frogs splash in when hear you. Sweet water —"

Bronson rubbed the butt of his horse pistol. The other three had thrown away everything except canteens that were now hardly damp inside, but Bronson had kept the pistol.

One thing good he remembered — the day he'd run away to join Carrington's Indian-fighting army and they had given him a uniform like the men wore, and a gun. He had known he was damn near growed up then — when they gave him the gun.

Bronson felt the slow dull heated rage at the old Indian, felt it growing. He yelled. "Why's everyone listin' to this ole Injun? Dried up ole Injun! What we trustin' in a redskin for?"

Billingsley didn't look back either. "We got to trust ole Numakschi. We got to keep our heads, boy, and trust the only one who has any idea where we're going. I've read about what can happen to us. We gotta keep our heads. Keep going in one direction until we're out of this sink —"

"Yeah, but followin' an ole Injun! Why you fellas trustin' him?"

"We got to do it, boy, or pretty soon we'll start wondering which way to go. We start one way, that's wrong. Then we start another way, that's wrong. Then we start running in circles and the water's gone, and then we tear off our clothes and scratch the ground. And years later they find us all shriveled up like little rabbits."

Bronson wanted to tell him how he hated to be called 'boy,' but he didn't.

Bronson waited a while, but he couldn't stay quiet. "Listen," he yelled, "you look over there to the left! You see another mountain over thataway. Take a look!"

Everybody stopped and stood there, corroded by the sun, gnawed by vitriolic dust. They looked slowly and long, their gaunt necks bobbing from mountain to mountain.

"Sure," Billingsley finally said. "Another mountain sure as hell!"

"Mountains all around," Sloane said. "We're in a sink, ringed with mountains."

"Yeah, but that one on the left, that's shaped sorta' like a goat's horn on top too. Ain't it? Ain't it now?"

After a while, Billingsley whispered. "There sure's a resemblance."

Bronson jumped up and down. "So how you know the ole Injun's picked the right mountain?"

"That one on the left, it's sure shaped something like a goat's horn," Sloane agreed.

"Hey, Wolf Chief," Billingsley said. "How can you tell which one is right?"

The Indian turned. "I know way. Mountains . . . different." He turned and plodded on. Bronson hated him more for being so sure, so uppity. The Indian's voice came back. "I know way. Sweet water. Green. Cool. Little frogs splashing . . . water . . . water under green tree . . ."

Then Bronson yelled again. His voice wasn't loud. It wheezed and squeezed through his tightened throat. But inside himself he was yelling. "Listen! We're Injun fighters, ain't we? Firs' Dragoons?"

Nobody said anything. Drag, drag, swoosh . . . swoosh, through the hot, hot sand.

"He's an Injun, ain't he? We fight Injuns. They fight us. We just killed a whole pack of the varmints, didn't we?"

"That's right." Sloane stared dazed at the naked hot skin of the sky. "They came out of the brush, out of rocks and sand, like a bunch of varmints. Up went the barricades. We overturned the wagons and shot the horses and mules and piled everything up around us, but nothing did any good. We aren't dead yet. But I guess it'll always be my fault now that the others are."

"That ain't what I mean," yelled Bronson. "What I mean is — that ole devil — he's an Injun too, ain't he? He was our guide. Didn't he lead us into the ambush? Now he's leadin' us to hell! He's watchin', waitin' for us to die too!"

No one said anything. Plod. Plod. Whooosh. Whooosh. Slide . . . slide.

"Why don't you say something?" Bronson yelled. "You know I'm sayin' it true!"

He kept on screaming about how it was. But nobody even bothered to answer.

Bronson squeezed his mouth shut, clamped it tight as his blistered jowls darkened and hardened. They won't listen, he thought, because I'm a kid. Sloane was fifty, been fighting Indians almost all his life. Billingsley was almost forty and he'd been killing them for years. Bronson was just a kid off a Missouri farm, hayseeds in his hair, hadn't even fired off a gun, hadn't even got his first Indian.

How many times had he heard it, he couldn't remember how many. The men in the trading post, the smell of rolled tobacco and stinking hides and whiskey and someone saying young Bronson'd never grow up 'til he'd bagged his first Injun.

They walked. They walked through flame.

Bronson's throat was swollen tight and he watched the heat waves rising and he watched old Numakschi with a dumb absorption.

Finally he tapped Billingsley on the shoulder. Dust filtered and ground into Bronson's eyes. Billingsley turned his long horseface slowly, and kept on walking, stumbling a little. Bronson pointed. His lips were stretched back tight over his stained teeth.

"Look, Lieutenant. This time . . . look there to the right, sir."

Billingsley looked. He coughed and grabbed at Sloane's torn coat and pointed and Sloane looked. "See, Colonel. Another mountain, over to the right this time. Don't — say, now, don't it have a kind of a goat horn look, too?"

They peered, half blinded, blinking lids over burned eyes. Grey dust bounced from Billingsley's thick black hair as he took off his hat and slapped at it, and then peered to the right again.

Sloane's lips moved several times and then he pawed in Numakschi's direction without looking at the Indian. Then he whispered thickly. "You, Wolf Chief — they're right. There's another mountain, on the right, with a resemblance to a goat's horn. Look at it, Wolf Chief."

Sloane kept leaning forward, his bowed legs shaking slightly in the middle, and he kept slapping his right hand against his thigh absently as though he might once have carried a riding crop in it.

Numakschi said. "No. Only one mountain where water and life. You stay behind me."

Sloane shook his head. "Maybe. I can't see so good any more."

"I can," Billingsley finally said. "I can see pretty good. I tell you, now there's three mountains, and the peaks of all three of 'em look like goat's horns. I wouldn't have noticed, 'ceptin' for the kid. He sees things."

Numakschi waved his arms. His lizard-hued face, framed in the dusty blanket he had pulled over his head like a cowl, shook slowly to either side. "Heat. See things. I here before. I know way."

He turned, but Bronson yelled at him and the Indian turned slowly to look at the young private from Missouri.

"How about you, redskin? You seein' things too? Seein' us walkin' an' walkin' till we drop dead? Only three of us left, an' you gotta' get us too, huh?"

"Aw," Sloane wheezed. "That's not true, Private Bronson. Ole Numakschi's been one of Carrington's favorite guides for almost a year. He wouldn't —"

"He led us into an ambush, didn't he? We shouldn't oughta trust no redskin! We should oughta go the way we know's right! He's an Injun!"

"I no Apache," Numakschi said softly. "I Shoshone. Shoshone no fight."

"Sure," Billingsley said. "Shoshones are friendly, they're garrison Indians."

"Young man!" Sloane said, and he slapped his empty hand on his thigh. "You're just trying to make trouble!"

Sullenly, Bronson dropped back about ten feet and walked after them.

A small black string of beads, they crawled across the sink's glittering face. They toiled, relaxed to passive endurance, holding their brains in stupor, trying never to realize the uselessness of their progress upon the surface of this flat immensity, the smallness of their effort beneath the encircling mountains of painted and veiled disdain.

Billingsley kept glancing furtively to the left and several times he shook his head. Sloane, sometimes, looked to the right. Sometimes he stopped and peered at the distant mountains, trying to make up his mind whether or not he saw a peak there that resembled a goat's horn.

Numakschi only looked straight ahead as though he still knew right where he was going.

"No water in all these mountains except by that one straight ahead?" Sloane asked. His voice sounded far away to Bronson, who hardly heard him. Bronson kept looking at Numakschi's back, wavering and blurred in the heat.

"That only one," Numakschi said.

Bronson knew he couldn't bear hearing it all repeated over and over. He knew it was all a lie.

He didn't argue with Billingsley or Sloane about it. He knew one thing — that there wasn't any difference between a Shoshone and an Apache. Blackfoot, Crow, Sioux, Arapaho, Cheyenne. They were all Injuns. They were all the same. All alike. All with the same kind of animal cunning, all treacherous. Everybody knew that.

Sloane and Billingsley, they knew it. Only thing was — they didn't want to admit the truth. Afraid to. Scared to go their own way, pick out their own mountain and go for it.

Indian-fighting blue coats, following after an ole redskin like he knew where he was going, like he was telling the truth. Like he knew more than they did. Like he was a leader and they weren't nothing but cows or sheep, following him to hell.

"He's leadin' us to die," Bronson said.

He knew he was saying it for the last time, and that it wouldn't make any difference. But he had to say it once more.

"Three mountains, an' sweet water, an' you trustin' that red Injun. I guess you really know what he's a-doin'."

After a while Sloane answered. "Ole Wolf Chief's the doctor, kid. We haven't had any experience at this. We'd only be guessing anyway. So why not guess that the Indian's right? He claims to know this country. Carrington trusts him. We only got one chance. We got to make the right hill first. If we don't — well — we'll be running crazy. Running in circles, then tearing off our clothes, then clawing the ground, then curling up like little rabbits."

They were scared, Bronson knew. It was up to him. Manhood wasn't a matter of age. It was a matter of guts.

He dropped his hand on the shiny walnut butt of the horse pistol and wrapped his fingers around it. It burned his hand. He hardly noticed.

Then he slid the heavy pistol out and put his left hand under the barrel to support it.

Their feet hissed over the sand. Things were blurred. Bronson dampened his puffy lips.

He raised the gun and then hurried his steps a little, caught up, then stopped dead still and carefully sighted.

Old Numakschi looked sort of like a big coon, or a bear shambling along in the heat waves — the comb of hair, the braids swaying a little and

the blanket gathered over his thin shoulders.

All his life, it seemed now, Bronson had thought of this moment. Lying in the attic of the cabin at night, wind pawing at the cracks between the logs, he had lain and dreamed of this.

He began to feel the blood beating in him, and the breath light and quick in his throat. At this range he couldn't miss. He had the line on the sights and all he had to do was pull the trigger. He couldn't miss.

For an instant, Bronson seemed to be lying on the rough-hewn lumber boards of the shed and his old man was looking down through shadows with the length of thick harness raised. The face was distorted, the stained teeth bared, the eyes wide and bulging, the face getting bigger and bigger.

"Injun bastard!" Bronson screamed and fired.

Numakschi dropped as the pistol roared. He hung for a bare instant, facing the goat's horn mountain of his choice, then dropped.

Sloane and Billingsley stood there, neither of them moving at all, not even a hand, and the great flaming silence immediately enveloped the sound of the shot, swallowed it.

Then they turned and looked at Bronson. He stood there with the small wisp of blue smoke still clinging to the pistol, twisting upon itself.

"You shouldn't have done that," Sloane whispered. His reddened eyes blinked helplessly and his hands slapped absently at his thigh. Billingsley took a halting step toward Bronson, then twisted drunkenly and stumbled to the Indian and touched him. He straightened up and looked around at the mountains circling the sink, and back at the Indian.

The Indian was dead all right, Bronson knew. Dead as a damn doornail. He lay crumpled in the bushes with his old blanket and his proud wisp of hair, face turned up, mouth loose. . . . He looked different now . . . runty, thin, with scars on him, and the marks of hunger and age.

Billingsley started to take a quick violent run toward Bronson, but then his body sagged and he just sat down and looked at him.

Sloane swore a while, then shielded his eyes and looked to the right.

Bronson slid the pistol back and his chest expanded. He felt tears running out of his eyes. He blinked and stuttered and all the water in his body seemed to rush to the surface.

"I got him," he whispered. "I got my Injun!"

"You shouldn't have done that," Sloane whispered again.

"No," Billingsley said. "You ought not have done it."

"It was either him or us," Bronson said. "He was lyin'. He was takin' us to die."

"Maybe he was, maybe he wasn't," Sloane said. "Now he's dead."

"I got him," Bronson said.

A little later Sloane said, "We have to decide now. Let's forget the Wolf Chief and all that's gone. And let's start now and decide what to do."

"We go to the left," Billingsley said. "That mountain."

"I've been thinking and looking," Sloane said. "I think maybe we're all wrong. Everybody wrong, from away back there somewhere." His voice was very tired and it seemed reluctant to come out at all. He turned away from both of them and started walking slowly, his arms lax, his boots sliding over the sand. "But now nobody's sure what's right. Before, somebody knew."

"Wait! Colonel Sloane, sir, wait!" Billingsley cried. He crawled on his hands and knees after Sloane and then stretched on his stomach, his arm reaching over the sand, his fingers reaching. "Colonel Sloane, sir, you're going the wrong way. You're going back, back the way we came."

Sloane didn't look back. "I know. Goodbye."

"No, that's crazy!" Billingsley yelled. "That's going back the way we came! You can't go far, no water or anything, and you know it's wrong. We've been there. We started there."

"I know," Sloane called out. "I figure maybe I can find where we made the mistake back there somewhere."

Billingsley lay there and watched Sloane walk away. Then he got up heavily and walked away to the left.

Bronson cried out after him and ran and fell on his knees and grabbed Billingsley's coat.

"You're wrong. Listen, Sloane was right the first time, I mean, not now. We should go to the right. I know that's the way! That's where we'll find the sweet water, and —"

Billingsley looked down and shook his head. "No, that's not the way. I always felt somehow that ole Numakschi was wrong. Now he's dead, and it isn't hard to go my way. This way."

"No, no, that's wrong! Listen, we got to stick together —"

Billingsley tore Bronson's hand loose and threw them away. "Then you come along with me, kid. Because this is the way to go."

Bronson crawled after him a little way, then sat there, his knees bent, his fingers curling at the sand.

"Don't," he whispered. "You oughta know. None of us'll ever make it by ourselves."

Billingsley stopped and looked back. "We each take his own mountain, kid. That's the way."

Bronson sat and watched Billingsley go on and on. He looked at Sloane. Both of them were walking away from him, leaving him alone, plodding, each a small black crawling thing, across the sink's glittering emptiness.

Bright light lanced like splinters into the tender flesh of his eyeballs, danced about the base of his brain in reddened choleric circles.

He lay down and put his face on

his arm, and closed his eyes. For a long time he lay there, and the sun started down the sky to rest. For a while he felt the awfulness of being left alone. Then he realized that he wasn't alone.

There was ole Numakschi.

Nobody could make it by himself. He finally got up and stumbled around, and got over to the inert mound under the blanket. "Dead," Bronson whispered. "Some crazy fool killed the Injun!"

He got down on his knees and put his ear to the thin bony chest. "Dead, sure is, deader'n a doornail. Some crazy fool up and shot the ole Injun." Somebody had done something very wrong. The ole Injun knew the country. He knew where to go.

Bronson moaned, his face contorted, his unconscious tears slinking out of his eye sockets, to become lost in matted hair about his ears.

He got his arms under the Indian and after a while he managed to stand up. His knees waggled a little. His ankles turned in the soft sand. He stood there holding the Indian, looking at the mountain straight ahead that the Indian had known was the right one.

His face had drawn back and his nose was beak-like; his irises had become a bright painful blue in the reddened ovals of his eyes, and the beginnings of his blond beard looked red and brown and filthy, matted with sweat, mud and dried blood.

He held the thin light wisp of body tight against his chest and started walking.

He felt older, a lot older. He felt wise and old and capable, and an exhilaration filled his chest that he'd never felt before.

He had never felt so confident and sure, sure of getting where he was going, of doing the right thing.

He didn't remember when it was that he stopped walking. The last thing he remembered was the dropping down into softness, and the strong high glad feeling in him and the clearness in his brain.

The stars of nights and the suns of days blazed over the sink.

Flesh dissolves cleanly in sterile, arid air, as with time old arrases crumble to powder of gold. Finally it leaves only clean white bones clothed here and there with a small surface of tanned, resonant skin.

After the years a numerous, secure, well-equipped party found them. The Indian, and the other one lying across him, his arms under the Indian's back, head pointing straight ahead.

"Look," one of the party said. "He was carrying him, see? And he was going right when he fell. See, how he's facing toward that mountain? Making straight for the only sweet water for miles around."

# JUDD

OLD JUDD BIRKITT sat on the worn log door-sill of his cabin and looked down the slope and across the creek, watching Sam Jenkins and the stringy woman Sam called his wife pile their few belongings in a rickety buckboard. The morning sun was warm on his face and he wriggled his old bare feet in the warm dust of his dooryard. The Jenkinses drove away without a glance back at the shack in which they had lived for better than four years. *Footloose*, he thought. *They would be the first to go. . . .*

The sun made its circuit overhead and dropped into the mountains behind the cabin, and in the morning Old Judd sat in his doorway and looked down and across at Bartlett's store. Workmen were pulling apart the plank building. He scrooged in a pocket of his faded jeans, found a remnant of tobacco quid and gnawed off a small chew. He watched John Bartlett fuss about and shout directions as the workmen loaded the planks on a pair of flatbed wagons. *Greedy*, he thought. *Got a price for it and carting it away too. . . .*

The sun climbed past noon and what had been Bartlett's store building went away on the wagons along the lower valley road. Darkness swept out of the mountains, and Old Judd lit his lantern and prepared his evening meal. In the morning he sat on his log door-sill and looked down and across the creek at what remained of the little road-fork town, and watched the people departing. The flies were bad and he slapped at them and let the sun's warmth soak into his bones. Family after family was leaving in wagons or buggies, and the Crutchleys with their stair-step line of kids on foot and the blacksmith with his anvil and heavy tools on an ox-cart and the schoolmaster on horseback with saddlebags full of books were going too. The sun swung on its high arc and the afternoon rays beat against the back of the cabin and across the creek on the almost empty town and when darkness took it the only other light in the valley outside the cabin was in the big frame house rising above the others on the townside of the creek. Old Judd stood in his doorway and studied the yellow-patch windows of the big house across the creek, almost level with his cabin. He blew out his lantern and shed his jeans and lay on his bunk. *Waiting to be the last of them*, he thought. *But he'll go like all the rest. . . .*

Light crept over the eastern valley rim behind the big house and broke free and streaked across the sky and the sun shone warm on the cabin doorway. Old Judd rinsed his frying pan and coffee cup, settled on the log door-sill and watched the Peabodys strip the big house of its

*Sure, progress is a wonderful thing. But try to explain that to a tired man who sees his whole life being swept away.*

**BY JACK SCHAEFER**

furnishings and load these on their big freight wagon. He slapped at the flies, watching Luke Peabody and his two big sons lash the load tight and harness the big work teams in double tandem, and bring out the surrey with the tall trotter in the traces. The womenfolk came from the house and climbed into the surrey and the men swung up on the wagon and Old Judd sat still and watched them go.

The wagon and the surrey behind it stopped. Luke Peabody swung out on a wheel hub to the ground and walked back in the road dust, looking at the big house. He turned and looked across the creek at Old Judd. Then he walked to the creek edge and made a funnel of his hands at his mouth and shouted. Old Judd caught the voice with ears that could still catch the rustle of deer hooves in grass at more than fifty paces, but he sat quiet and waited, and watched Luke Peabody shake his head in exasperation and shout again, and at last stride across the creek, through water above his knees, to the top of the slope.

"Birkitt," said Luke Peabody. "Seventeen year I've lived here and not once known you to be neighborly. Could be my fault some. I've thought you an opinionated shiftless old fool, and said so many a time. That doesn't matter much now. I'd like to leave with a friendly word. Here's my hand on it."

Luke Peabody put out a big hand with the fingers stretched and reaching, and Old Judd sat still and looked up with eye-corners tightening. Luke Peabody let his hand drop. "So be it," he said. "All the same I'm asking a favor." And Old Judd tightened his eye-corners more. "Thought there'd be a ketch to it," he said.

"Do you think I'd ask you was there anyone else left around?" Luke Peabody raised his hand and wiped it, palm flat, across his face. "I want you to set fire to my place." And Old Judd's eyes opened wide and he looked down at the dooryard dust and up again sharp and quick. "Why?" His voice was dry.

"Because I don't like to think what'll happen to it if it just stands there."

Old Judd looked down at his feet in the dust and pulled them in close under him, and stood up and held out a hand. "Changed my mind." And Old Judd Birkitt and Luke Peabody shook hands, both of them slow and solemn, and Luke Peabody started away and swung his head back without stopping and spoke fast. "You'll wait till we're out of sight around the bend?"

Old Judd sat on his door-sill and slapped at the flies and watched the wagon and the surrey fade in a dust haze around the bend of the lower valley road. *Got some of a man's feelings*, he thought. *But can't do the hard things himself . . .*

The sun arched overhead and Old Judd went inside and opened a can of beans. After he had eaten he went down to the creek and rolled up his jeans and waded across. He went along the lane by the squat stone piers on which Bartlett's store had rested and on by the deserted houses and shacks to the big house. He made a slow circuit of the place, peering in at the stripped empty rooms. He took an armload of old straw from the stable and pushed this under the jutting rear porch. When the flames were licking at the wood he went back to the creek and waded across and on up to his cabin. He sat in his doorway, legs out drying in front of him, and watched the flames leap into view over the rear roof of the house and eat their way forward on the shingles. The wood of the house was dry with the years and the season and the fire reached and ran till the whole structure was blazing. Old Judd sat quiet and watched and it was his alone. There was no one else in the whole section of the valley to see it.

The uprush of flames slackened and the charring shell of the house shuddered and collapsed backward and the flames leaped again, then settled down to steady gnawing at the wreckage. Old Judd stirred and swung his head to study the wide view before him. Shadows were long now, stretching away from him, and the deserted town and sweep of valley were hushed in the silence of their emptiness. *Breathing's easier*, he thought. *No people crowding a man's elbows. . . .*

He looked down the valley to the right where the lower road curved away and ran on beyond vision around the bend, to where he knew the crews of men were at work, and the heavy stone-wagons were rolling, and the carloads of gravel and cement were shuttling on the railroad spur. His eye-corners tightened, and he looked away with a quick jerk of his head.

The shadows merged into the over-all darkening of dusk as the sun dropped into the mountains behind the cabin, and he straightened and went around the corner to the left and to the near stand of trees, where the tall square stone of white

mountain marble still showed plain against the dark ivy on the ground. He stooped to pull away an ivy sprig starting up the stone. *Just you and me again, Marthy*, he thought. *Like it was in the beginning. . . .*

A thin sliver of moon passed low over the horizon and the stars wheeled above. An hour before dawn Old Judd rolled out of his bunk and pulled on his faded jeans and a pair of moccasins. He was restless with a renewed eager spryness oiling his old joints. He took from the wall the old Colt repeating cylinder rifle that had never failed him in almost forty years' service. When the sun broke over the eastern valley rim he was three miles up the creek and over the first side ridge, heading into the rocky highlands towards the small hidden canyon that he alone knew.

Three hours later he was headed homeward with the dressed carcass of a small whitetail buck draped over his shoulders. His knees gave him trouble now, and he stopped often to rest. Several times the fingers of his left hand holding the legs locked together in front grew numb and could no longer grasp and the carcass slid from his shoulders, and he had to flex the fingers till strength returned to them, then kneel and stoop to get the carcass in place again, using the rifle as a cane to lever himself to his feet. Once he fell and rolled twenty feet down slope, bruising against stone, and lay still for a while breathing in short gasps and cursing soft to himself. The sun shone on him with the remembered friendliness of long past days and warmed his old bones, and he rose and retrieved the rifle and gathered up the carcass again. He made the final stretch to the cabin with a sustained stumbling rush because he was afraid that if he stopped he might not get started with his burden once more. It dropped to the dooryard with a soft thud and he sank on the log door-sill and kicked off the moccasins to wriggle his old toes in the warm dust. *Knew it*, he thought. *Knew I could still do it. . . .*

Old Judd reached inside the cabin for his ramrod and a piece of greasy rag. Quiet and serene in the sunlight, he began cleaning the rifle. He was polishing the worn stock when his ears caught the sound and his head lifted, and he saw the small wagon coming up the lower valley road. He rested the rifle across his knees and watched the wagon approach and turn to ford the creek below him, and stop on the near side. His eye-corners tightened into a squint as he watched the broad homely grey-topped figure of Sheriff Jesse Whitfield climb to the ground followed by another man, bigger even than the sheriff, taller and wide-shouldered and handsome in his city clothes. He squirmed a bit on the door-sill and froze to stillness as they came close.

"Morning, Judd," said Sheriff Whitfield, and nodded at the deer carcass. "So you can still find 'em when nobody else can." And Old

Judd sat quiet. The carcass itself was his response.

Sheriff Whitfield wiped the sweat beads from his forehead and ran his hand on back through his thick grey hair. He sighed and pushed himself to his task. "Judd. You're being honored today. This is Hanson J. Powell. Engineer. Boss of the whole works. The whole blooming project. Insisted on seeing you himself."

Engineer Powell stepped forward and unleashed a rich voice, hearty and confident. "Delighted to meet you, Mr. Birkitt." And Old Judd looked at him with one quick glance and sat quiet.

Engineer Powell stepped back a pace and rocked on the soles of his trim new boots. "No reason for hard feelings, Mr. Birkitt. I came myself because I'm sure our agents failed to put the proposition to you in the proper light. Everyone else is cooperating. They have been paid good prices and have moved out. They are not standing in the path of progress. They know what we are doing is big. Really big. Why, when we finish the dam and this valley is filled, we will have a reservoir that will irrigate fifty-seven thousand acres of that dry land out on the level. Fifty-seven thousand acres, Mr. Birkitt. Enough to provide prosperous living for hundreds of healthy farm families. More than that. We will have shown the way for the whole territory. There will be other projects like this. We will be making the desert bloom —"

Sheriff Jesse Whitfield shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "I told you, Powell," he said. "You're wasting your breath."

"No," said Engineer Powell. "I refuse to believe that one man would be so stubborn as to try to block the will of many others. I refuse to believe that any man would cling so tightly to a scrubby little cabin like this and a few poor acres he doesn't even try to do anything with." Engineer Powell rocked again on his boot soles and his voice dropped to a lower, more confidential tone. "Mr. Birkitt. I will give you double the last price offered you and that is a final figure."

Old Judd rubbed one hand along the rifle barrel and back, and sat quiet, and Sheriff Whitfield spoke, dry and disgusted. "Get on with it, Powell. Tell him what's happened."

"Very well," said Engineer Powell. "I made that offer, Mr. Birkitt, simply to satisfy my own conscience. There was no need for it. Your property here has been condemned by court order and taken over by rule of eminent domain. You are being paid the assessed value only plus a small sum for the supposed inconvenience caused you. A check has been deposited in your name at the county bank. This property, along with all the rest, now belongs to the land development company. We drove out this morning to tell you and move your belongings, if you have any, to the county seat. What you do thereafter isn't my concern."

Old Judd sat still but his hands moved and the rifle swung until its barrel pointed at Engineer Powell. "Get off my land," he said.

Engineer Powell put his hands on his hips and rocked on his boot soles, bringing the toes down firm. "This is no longer your land." And Old Judd pulled back the hammer on the old rifle with a little snap. "You heard me," he said. "Ain't in the habit of speaking twice." And Sheriff Whitfield spoke, his voice crisp. "Go back to the wagon, Powell. I'll handle this."

The wagon creaked as Engineer Powell climbed to the seat and silence settled up the slope over the cabin dooryard. Sheriff Whitfield stood, big and broad, and his shadow covered Old Judd on the door-sill and his voice was mild. "The gun's empty," he said. "You were cleaning it." And Old Judd shrugged his shoulders a bit. "Can't talk to that bedamned easterner," he said.

"You're up against the law now," said Sheriff Whitfield. And Old Judd looked at him, eyes wide and clear. "Remember when your father came here," said Old Judd. "Walking with his ox-cart up this valley. Staking a claim over that first ridge. Remember when you were born. Remember Marthy feeding you biscuit in this cabin afore you shed your first teeth. Remember showing you how to find deer. Remember when you married. Remember when your kids were born. And their kids too. You'll not put me off."

Sheriff Whitfield drew a long breath and let it out sighing and leaned against the cabin wall. "But why? You're too old to be living off here alone. You can't have much time left. Should think you'd want to spend it where things are easier."

Old Judd stretched out his legs and reached to scratch a toe with the end of the rifle barrel. "Don't want things easy. Want them like now. Better with all those newcomers gone. Was too bedamned crowded. Came here afore anyone else. The first. Now the last." He set the rifle across his knees and looked down at it and ran one hand over and over along the barrel. "Moved all around these territories way back then. Always trying it over the next hills. Marthy took it long enough. 'Always settling,' she put it, 'and never settled.' Made me promise to find a place and keep it. Found this. Kept it."

The voice of Engineer Powell rose in a shout, impatience driving it up the slope. "Doesn't that old fool know his place'll be under twenty feet of water soon as the valley is filled?"

Sheriff Whitfield gave no sign he had heard. He looked down at Old Judd. "Martha's been dead a long time," he said. And Old Judd gave a small jerk of his head towards the left corner of the cabin. "She's here," he said.

"They'll move her for you. Just say the word and they'll move her down to the cemetery at the county

seat." And Old Judd whipped his head up quick, and his eye-corners tightened sharp. "Move her? Moved her too often when she was alive."

The voice of Engineer Powell drove up the slope. "Sheriff. Are you going to bring him along?" The voice of Sheriff Whitfield drove down the slope with a sudden snap. "No. I'm an old fool too." And the voice of Engineer Powell became cold and contemptuous. "Come along then. My time is valuable. Let him stay there and rot. He'll get out fast enough when the water starts rising."

Dust rose along the lower valley road again, and Old Judd sat in his doorway and watched the wagon disappear around the bend. The flies were gathering and he rose to tend to the meat. *Always could handle Jesse*, he thought. *Being sheriff hasn't changed him any. . . .*

The sun arched overhead and dropped into the mountains and the night breeze talked in the trees and the days passed and the nights between and Old Judd endured them with slow satisfaction in his solitude. Several times on a Sunday, curious people from the work camp in the lower valley came up the road, but when he sat on his door-sill with the old rifle across his knees they kept a wary distance and went away soon. At odd intervals Sheriff Jesse Whitfield appeared, ambling in from various directions on his big bunchy roan, to bring a fragrant tobacco quid and lean against the cabin and look out over the valley, and speak after long moments of memories of the old days. The rest of the time Old Judd was alone, and the quiet independent serenity of other years crept back and sat with him on the door-sill as he watched the weeds take the cleared places around the deserted houses across the creek, or went with him as he wandered the neighbor hills, rifle in hand, and saw the small game working back into long-lost territory. Sometimes, sitting still in the doorway, his old ears caught the rumbling down valley that must be dynamite blasts and rock-car unloadings, where the valley narrowed and the side walls came close and the dam was rising, and these were the times he pushed to his feet and went off on long tramps over almost-forgotten trails.

The days passed and the nights between and haze began to fill the shortening afternoons as the edge of fall sharpened the air, and he killed another deer and strained to pack the carcass home, smoked the meat and dragged fallen timber to the cabin to be cut and stacked close against the walls. Then all rumbling ceased in the distance. Days passed and the silence in that direction deepened, and he found himself unable or unwilling to leave the cabin; the almost unconscious expectancy gripped him and the waiting began. Day after day he sat still, bundled now in his old buffalo coat, and his head turned ever more often to the right towards the lower valley and

at last he saw it, the slow widening of the creek where it followed the road around the bend.

It was no more than a gradual swelling at first, a broadening of the lazy late-fall creek where this curved around and out of sight. For hours at a time he saw no difference at the distance. Then with a start he realized the water had slipped sidewise into another hollow and spread its hold on the land. By evening of the third day he saw the upward inching line clear across the valley bed and the solid sheen of water behind, broken only by clumps of bush-tops and the lonely boles of trees whose roots were engulfed. He sat still and was so sunk in the watching that he did not hear the horses coming down the old trail behind the cabin until they moved around the side towards him.

Sheriff Jesse Whitfield let drop the reins of the empty-saddled horse he was leading and swung down from his big roan. He leaned against the cabin wall and looked down valley at the edging sheen of water. "Winter's being hatched in the mountains," he said. "Get your things together, Judd. We've fixed a room at my place."

Old Judd pulled the buffalo coat closer around him. "Bedamned about it," he said in sudden irritation. "Why're you so all-fired keen on taking care of me?"

Sheriff Whitfield pulled a sliver of ancient bark from the cabin wall and chewed on it in slow thought. "Maybe because you mean something to me," he said. "You sort of stand for the way it was when I was a kid." And Old Judd looked at him and away, and down at his moccasined feet. "Maybe that's why I won't go." He waved an arm at the water down valley. "Can't rise much during the cold. Got plenty of food and wood. Intend to see it through." The sound of one horse stamping a hoof was sharp in the long silence, and Old Judd stirred on the doorsill. "One more winter," he said. "Not much for a man to want." And Sheriff Whitfield smacked a fist into the cabin wall and stepped out and scooped up the reins of the other horse, and swung up on his big roan. Old Judd sat still and heard the sound of the hooves fading on the trail behind the cabin. *Still the same Jesse*, he thought. *Raised them right in those days. . . .*

The landscape browned and the now endless wind strengthened and stripped the trees till only the evergreens held their color, and the water crept forward measuring its advance by almost imperceptible degrees according to the ground confronting it. Old Judd sat and watched it every daylight hour till the cold drove him inside, and then he kept a fire blazing and sat on his barrel-stool, and watched through the window in the right wall. Ice formed in the creek and thickened, and the flow dwindled. The first snow floated down from the mountains, and the days passed and the

snow came again, whipping into a blizzard that packed the low places and piled the drifts. He could see only driving white through the window, and when the weather cleared, the valley was wrapped for winter, and the edge of water was lost beneath the blanket of snow spreading unbroken, from the frozen ground on over the surface of ice.

Old Judd stayed inside now, and the days passed and the weeks. Daylight and dark were the same to him and he waked and dozed and ate when hunger prompted, and fed the fire with no attention to time. Outside, the winter held its course rigid and with repeated snowings, and inside, he lived through other winters in his mind. Remembrance ran back into the far years and he sat by the fire and talked to Martha, knowing she was not there but outside under the tall stone, and yet he talked to her, and the old cabin was filled with her quiet listening. He dozed and woke to feed the fire and dozed again, and he came over the high slope behind the cabin with the tireless energy of youth in his legs, and the valley reached untouched before him and he turned to call her to hurry beside him. He stirred and brought in more wood, and the fire leaped again. The muscles of his back and shoulders ached with a satisfying weariness as he drove his ax deep into the trunks of stout trees and felled them and lopped away the branches and drag-rolled the logs to the cabin-site, and she helped him notch them and set them in place. He let the ash-choked fire go out and cleaned the fireplace and coaxed new flames into leaping action, and he stood outside with the sunset behind him and the contentment of a man's full-day work upon him, and she was beside him. They looked down the valley where people passed along the trail by the creek he had made, packing in supplies, and the people fanned out to settle in the surrounding hills and he knew them all and was one of them, and their neighborliness was a good thing with no pressure in it, and they gathered to help him bury her and the stillborn child under the white stone.

The endless wind rushed with rising strength outside and beat through chinks in the cabin wall, fighting with the fire, and he kept this well-fed and pulled his stool close, and he sat on the log door-sill, alone, in the round of the days, and one by one old neighbors over the hills faded out of knowing. The trail broadened into a road and the town grew, house by house, and the people were strangers who kept away from him, afraid of his long silences and sudden sharp speech, telling themselves strange tales about him, and he watched them and their hurryings, and let time glide past in the inevitable moving of the years.

The days grew longer, and the wind slackened and rose and slackened and rose again, coming now in gusts or sighing with a new softness.

The snow settled during the days to harden only at night, and the ice became spongy; and, at last, the creek broke through all covering and cleared its bed, and raced with rising vigor tumbling slush and ice chunks with it. The sun beat down and the snow settled and faded and clear spots appeared on the high slopes. Old Judd stood in his doorway and saw the water stretching in a vast sheet from the small rise at the edge of the empty town on down the valley, and out of sight around the bend below.

The creek rose, shouting in spring exuberance, and poured the water from the melting snow far up its course in the mountains down into the growing lake. The level of the stretching sheet climbed by visible hourly stages and Old Judd sat on the door-sill and watched it top the rise by the town edge and run like a reaching finger along the road, and spill into the cellar-hole where Bartlett's store had been. Down valley, the trees surrounded in the fall stayed brown and bare, but up the high slopes the small buds burst, and a tinge of green flushed along the boughs, and he sat still and shed his old buffalo coat in the sun and watched the water take the houses, inching upward board by board.

It coiled around their lonely walls and slithered through cracks to explore the barren rooms. It swirled around their eaves and rolled up their roofs and over, and they were only dark shadows fading into the over-all sameness under the smooth, wet sheen of the surface. It washed over the charred remnants of Luke Peabody's place, and that blackened scar on the opposite slope was gone, a lost secret under the lake. There was no semblance of the creek now. It fed into the lake far on up the valley and the widening water crept up the slope towards the cabin. The sun shimmered on it by day, and the slice of growing moon by night, and Old Judd wore away the hours on his door-sill, and watched it move in and across his dooryard. Eating and the little necessities were mechanical habits, and with the apparent unthinking indifference of an old rock he watched the water rise and erase all that was familiar before him. When the first ripples reached his feet he straightened, and stepped up and stood in the doorway. When they lapped against the log he stepped back and closed the door. He looked all about him, studying every object in the cabin, and shook his head. Empty-handed, he went to the small rear door that gave on the rising slope behind and opened it, and hesitated, and returned by the fireplace to take the old rifle from its pegs. Holding it in the crook of an arm he went out the rear door and kicked this shut after him. Fifty feet up the slope he stopped on a small outcropping ledge, and lowered himself to sit on the rock.

The water edged along the sides of the cabin now, feeling along the base logs. Old Judd sat still and watched

it slide to the left and finger through the grass, and slip under and through the ivy leaves to curl slow and relentless around the base of the white stone. The sun swung far overhead and the water crept up the stone, and the sun dropped into the mountains behind him, and the moon rose and silvered the lake, and filtered its pale light through the trees by the cabin, and the soft shimmering of the water was halfway up the stone. The night cold sank into his joints and the white shaft seemed to sway in the rippling sheen, and he stared at it and toppled in a slow descent on his side in the sleep of exhaustion.

In the first light of morning Old Judd woke with a start and fought the chill stiffness of his old muscles to get back to a sitting position. He peered forward through the clearing greyness. Only the pointed tip of the white stone showed above the water, and ripples raised by the freshening breeze washed over that. He watched, and the water seemed to hold back from the point and then closed with a soft swish over it, and the stone was a grey-white shadow under the surface. Old Judd shivered and swung his head to look at the cabin. The water surrounded it and was high up the sides, and through the top panes of the side window he saw his bench floating past inside. The water rose and gurgled under the eaves, and started its climb up the low ridge of the roof. The ripples sent their small wettings ahead and the abiding edge of the water followed. Only the hump of the ridge remained, and this dwindled and became no more than the line of the center peak, and then this, too, was taken, and the lake spread untroubled from slope to far slope.

Old Judd stirred and shook his head, and the slow accumulating anger of the months came forward in his mind and broke, and left him empty and old beyond reckoning. He pushed to his feet, staggered, and caught himself, and as he looked around in a strange indecision he saw the broad figure standing ten yards away.

"All right, Judd," said Sheriff Jesse Whitfield. "It's finished. Come along now. I'm taking you home with me."

Old Judd Birkitt sat on the top step of the porch of Sheriff Whitfield's house, and looked out over the front hedge at the streets framing the central square of the county seat and the row of buildings beyond. The late spring sun was warm upon him, and he was grateful for it. Somehow he was never warm clear through any more. Across the way the stores were busy, and people passed up and down the courthouse steps and wagons moved along the street. Behind the buildings, where the railroad cut through to the station, an engine whistled, and its heavy breathing and the clatter of cars drifted across the square. Old Judd fidgeted on his step. *Bedamned*

*lot of goings-on*, he thought. *Makes a man tired just watching. . . .*

He pushed up and went around the house and across the backyard to the stable. He took a manure fork off the rack, and went in the big roan's empty stall, and began pitching the dirtied straw through the window to the pile outside. There was no snap left in his muscles, and he grunted with each forkful, but he kept at it with grim satisfaction. Footsteps sounded in the stable and he stopped. Sheriff Whitfield's dull-witted handyman stood in the stall doorway bobbing his head in slow rhythm. "That's my work, Mister Judd. Sheriff says you don't have to do anything around here."

Old Judd dropped the fork and let it lay, though the prongs were up. He pushed past the handyman and out of the stable, and swung on a circuit of the big yard just inside the hedge where his frequent tramping had already worn a path. He caught a movement of curtain at a house window and a glimpse of the sheriff's wife peering out. He stopped short. *Somebody's always checking on me*, he thought. *Seem to have the notion I'm off my rocker. . . .*

Back on the front step he opened his old knife and began whittling aimless shavings from a small piece of wood he had picked off the main stovepile. They flowed from the blade and fell around his feet, cluttering the bottom step. At last he was conscious of them. He stopped whittling and stared at them a long moment. He reached and picked them up one by one till the step was clear. He looked around and there was no place along the neat housefront to put them, and he jammed them with the knife in the pockets of his faded jeans. He sat still and watched the people and wagons across the way. *Don't belong here*, he thought. And after a while his eye corners tightened and his old lips folded into a firm line. *Jesse's wrong. It's not finished. Not yet. . . .*

The sunset glow bathed the house and died away into dusk and Old Judd sat at the supper table and listened in friendly attention to Sheriff Jesse Whitfield telling of the day's doings, and thanked the sheriff's wife for a good meal, though it still seemed strange to him to be eating food prepared by someone else. At last he was upstairs, in the room they had fixed for him. He sat by the window and watched the late moon rise, waiting till long after the whole house was dark and silent. With the old rifle in his hand, he slipped into the hall and down the stairs. His moccasined feet made no sound as he eased out the back door. He took the ax from the block by the woodpile, and an empty feed bag and a coil of rope from the stable. *Jesse won't mind*, he thought. *Won't grudge me these. . . .*

By sun-up he was past the dam and working along the valley rim. Through the trees he could see the lake below him, stretching broad and strange and beautiful on beyond

the upper bend. He came on the faint trace of the back trail that had led down to the cabin, and pushed on without stopping. A third of a mile further, he slipped down the slope to where a shoulder of land pushed out into the water. Sitting crosslegged by the water's edge, he studied the whole scene. The shimmering expanse of the lake seemed to throw the whole wide view out of focus, and for a time everything appeared unfamiliar to him. At last the water barrier began to fade in his mind and he grasped the valley again, complete and as it used to be. Turning his head in slow scrutiny, he scanned the entire valley rim, and fixed his landmarks for imaginary lines spanning the lake from side to side and lengthwise. Where they crossed was the spot he sought. He picked up a twig and tossed it into the water, and watched it move away. There was a current, slight and almost imperceptible, but moving, and in the right direction.

A few feet into the water nearby he found three trees of manageable size: dead, water-killed and bare. He stood in the shallow water and swung the ax, and some of the former snap seemed to flow into his old muscles. He felled two of the trees without halting, and rested, and the third took longer. Then it too lay ready, partway into the water, and he trimmed away the branches and lopped off the thin upper ends. Tugging at the logs, he got them further into the water, floating with only the inner ends grounded, and with part of the rope, he lashed them into a crude raft. He was panting now and soaked, and had to sink on the shore to rest. As he lay full-length on the ground he heard, down valley, the sound of a horse whinnying, and in the following silence he listened and caught the faint far-off shouting of several voices. He pushed up from the ground, hurrying now, and took the feed bag and filled it with stones and, tying the mouth shut, struggled with it until he had it on the near end of his raft. He paused to ease the breath fighting in his chest, and heard the voices coming closer, and frantic in haste he laid the rifle on the raft and splashed through the water to the outer end, and heaved until it was floating free. Careful not to tilt it, he crawled aboard and lay flat along the logs, paddling with his hands over the sides until his arm muscles bunched and refused to move.

Time passed, and boots crashed through brush along the lake shore, and voices shouted, and these were meaningless sounds to him. His muscles relaxed some and his breath eased, and he raised his head, straining it back on his neck like a turtle. He was well out into the lake, and the slow current was drifting him down and out towards the middle. He slapped against the water with his left hand and arm in a desperate flurry, and relief ran through him as the forward end of the raft

swung in a gradual arc in the right direction. He turned his head back, and there were figures running on the shore and one broad figure standing motionless on the shoulder of land watching him. *Don't care a bedamn about anyone else*, he thought. *But Jesse'll understand.* . . . And then he forgot them all and concentrated on steering his raft towards the crossing of his landmark lines.

The slow, almost imperceptible movement brought him closer and closer; and peering ahead and down he saw shifting shadows that steadied and became the clumped branches of a stand of submerged trees. Peering down with his face almost touching the water, he saw, and saw not, and seemed to see again a glimmering of white far down among the tree trunks, and ahead the big, humped shadow of the cabin roof. Inching around on the raft, he sat up and reached and took the free end of the rope from the bag, looped it around his waist and knotted it tight. He held the old rifle firm in one hand, and hunched along the logs until his feet touched the bag and began to push it. His weight and the weight of the bag together tilted the raft, and water washed over the end, and the bag slid and dropped in silent descent, and the rope tightened taut to his waist, and he heaved himself forward and down into the dim water. Cold engulfed him in a downward rush and his limbs thrashed and he did not know it, and his fingers remained clamped around the rifle. *It's finished*, he thought and all thinking ceased in an endless nothingness, and the disturbed water rocked above, and the small waves spread and died, and the cool surface of the lake spread serene and untroubled from slope to slope of the valley.

# Great

**A NOVELETTE**

*It took courage to wait there, wounded, and hope the white men wouldn't kill him when they came. But it would be worth the pain and danger if he knew the secret.*

DEEP in the country of the Crows, Little Belly squatted in the alders, waiting for his scouts. The Crows were many and angry in the hills this summer, and there was time to think of that; but since Little Belly was a Blackfoot who had counted five coups he could not allow his fear, even to himself.

He waited in the dappled shadows for more important news than word of Indians who did not love the Blackfeet.

Wild and long before him, the ridges whispered a soft, cool song. In shining steps, beaver ponds dropped to the great river flowing east toward the land of those with the mighty medicine. Dark and motionless, Little Belly waited.

He saw at last brief movement on a far hill, a touch of sun on the neck of a pony, the merest flash of a rider who had come too close to the edge of the trees.

That was No Horns and his appaloosa. No Horns, as ever, was riding without care. He was a Piegan and Little Belly was a Blood, both Blackfeet; but Blackfeet loved no

# Medicine

**BY STEVE FRAZEE**

one, sometimes not even each other. So Little Belly fingered his English knife and thought how easily small things caused one to die.

He saw no more of No Horns until the scout was quite close, and by then Whirlwind, the other scout, was also on the ridge. They came to Little Belly, not obliged to obey him, still doubtful of his mission.

Little Belly said to No Horns, "From a great distance I saw you."

"Let the Crows see me also." No Horns stretched on the ground with a grunt. Soon his chest was covered with mosquitoes.

Whirlwind looked to the east. Where the river broke the fierce sweep of ridges there was a wide, grassy route that marked the going and coming of Crows to the plains. Whirlwind pointed. "Two days."

"How many come?" Little Belly asked.

Whirlwind signalled fifty. "The Broken Face leads."

No white man in the mountains was greater than the trapper chief, Broken Face, whom the white men knew as Yancey. He took beaver from the country of the Blackfeet, and he killed Blackfeet. The Crows who put their arms about him in his camps thought long before trying to steal the horses of his company. If there was any weakness in Broken Face it was a weakness of mercy.

So considering, Little Belly formed the last part of his plan.

Half dozing in the deep shade where the mosquitoes whined their hunting songs, No Horns asked, "What is this medicine you will steal from the white trappers?"

It was not muskets. The Blackfeet had killed Crows with English guns long before other white men came from the east to the mountains. It was not ponies. The Blackfeet traded with the Nez Perces for better horses than any white trapper owned. It was not in the pouches of the white men, for Little Belly had ripped into the pouches carried on the belts of dead trappers, finding no great medicine.

But there was a power in white men that the Blackfeet feared. Twice now they had tried to wipe the trappers from the mountains forever, and twice the blood cost had been heavy; and the white men were still here. Little Belly felt a chill, born of the heavy shade and the long waiting, but coming mostly from the thought that what he must steal might be something that could not be carried in pouches.

He stood up. "I do not know what it is, but I will know it when I see it."

"It is their talk to the sky," Whirlwind said. "How can you steal that?"

"I will learn it."

No Horns grunted. "They will not let you hear."

"I will travel with them, and I will hear it."

"It is their Man Above," Whirlwind said. "He will know you are not a white man talking."

"No," Little Belly said. "It is something they carry with them."

"I did not find it," No Horns said, "and I have killed three white men."

"You did not kill them soon enough," Little Belly said. "They hid their power before they died."

"If their medicine had been strong, I could not have killed them at all." No Horns sat up. He left streaks of blood on the heavy muscles of his chest when he brushed mosquitoes away. "Their medicine is in their sky talk."

Whirlwind said, "The Nez Perces sent chiefs to the white man's biggest town on the muddy river. They asked for a white man to teach them of the Man Above, so that they could be strong like the white men. There were promises from the one who went across these mountains long ago. The chiefs died. No white man came to teach the Nez Perces about the sky talk to make them strong."

"The Nez Perces were fools," Little Belly said. "Does one go in peace asking for the ponies of the Crows? It is not the sky talk of the trappers that makes them strong. It is something else. I will find it and steal it."

Whirlwind and No Horns followed him to the horses. Staying in the trees, they rode close to the river, close to a place where the trappers going to their summer meeting place must pass.

Little Belly took a Crow arrow from his quiver. He gave it to Whirlwind, and then Little Belly touched his own shoulder. Whirlwind understood but hesitated.

He said, "There are two days yet."

"If the wound is fresh when the trappers come, they will wonder why no Crows are close," Little Belly said.

No Horns grinned like a buffalo wolf, showing his dislike of Little Belly. He snatched the arrow from Whirlwind, fitted it to his bow and drove it with a solid chop into Little Belly's shoulder.

With his face set to hide his pain, Little Belly turned his pony and rode into the rocks close by the grassy place to wait for the coming of the trappers. The feathered end of the shaft rose and fell to his motion, sawing the head against bone and muscle.

He did not try to pull the arrow free while his companions were close. When he heard them ride away on the long trip back to Blackfoot country he tried to wrench the arrow from his shoulder. The barbs were locked against bone. They ground on it. The pain made Little Little Belly weak and savage, bringing water to his face and arms.

He sat down in the rocks and

hacked the tough shaft off a few inches from his shoulder. He clamped his teeth close to the bleeding flesh, trying with strong movements of his neck to draw the iron head. Like a dog stripping flesh from a bone he tugged. The arrow seemed to loosen, dragging flesh and sinew with it; but the pain was great. All at once the sky turned black.

Little Belly's pony pulled away from the unconscious man and trotted to join the other two.

When Little Belly came back to the land of sky and grass he was willing to let the arrow stay where it was. It was better, too, that the white men would find him thus. But that night he was savage again with pain. He probed and twisted with the dull point of his knife until blood ran down and gathered in his breech clout. He could not get the arrow out. He thought then that he might die, and so he sang a death song, which meant that he was not afraid to die, and therefore, could not.

He dozed. The night was long, but it passed in time and the sun spread brightness on the land of the Crows. Hot and thirsty, Little Belly listened to the river, but he would not go to it in daylight. It was well he did not, for seven long-haired Crows came by when the sun was high. Three of them saw his pony tracks and came toward the rocks. Others, riding higher on the slope, found the tracks of all three horses. They called out excitedly.

A few seconds more and the three Crows coming toward Little Belly would have found him and chopped him up, but now they raced away to join the main hunt.

All day the wounded Blackfoot burned with thirst. The sun was hotter than he had ever remembered; it heaped coals on him and tortured his eyes with mist. When night came he waded into the tugging current of the river, going deep, bathing his wound and drinking. By the time he crept into the rocks again he was as hot as before. Many visions came to him that night but they ran so fast upon each other afterward he could not remember one of them clearly enough to make significance from it.

Old voices talked to him and old ghosts walked before him in the long black night. He was compressed by loneliness. The will to carry out his plan wavered. Sometimes he thought he would rise and run away, but he did not go.

## II

From afar he heard the trappers the next day. He crawled to the edge of the rocks. The Delaware scouts found him, grim, incurious men who were not truly Indians but brothers of the white trappers. Little Belly hated them.

Without dismounting, they watched him, laughing. One of them tipped his rifle down.

Little Belly found strength to rise then, facing the Delawares without fear. The dark, ghost-ridden hours

were gone. These were but men. All they could do to Little Belly was kill him. He looked at them and spat.

Now their rifles pointed at his chest, but when the Delawares saw they could not make him afraid, they dismounted and flung him on the ground. They took his weapons. They grunted over his strong Nez Perce shield, thumping it with their hands. Then they threw it into the river. They broke his arrows and threw away his bow. One of them kept his knife.

When they took his medicine pouch and scattered the contents on the ground, Little Belly would have fought them, and died, but he remembered that he had a mission.

The big white man who came galloping on a powerful horse was not Broken Face. This white man's beard grew only on his upper lip, like a long streak of sunset sky. His eyes were the color of deep ice upon a river. Strong and white his teeth flashed when he spoke to the Delawares. Little Belly saw at once that the Delawares stood in awe of this one, which was much to know.

The white man leaped from his horse. His rifle was strange, two barrels lying one upon the other.

"Blackfoot," one of the Delawares said.

Curiously, the white man looked at Little Belly.

A Delaware took his tomahawk from his belt and leaned over the Blackfoot.

"No," the white man said, without haste. He laughed. From his pocket he took a dark bone. A slender blade grew from it quickly. With this he cut the arrow from Little Belly's shoulder. He lifted Little Belly to his feet, looking deep into the Blackfoot's eyes.

Little Belly tried to hide his pain.

"Tough one," the white man said.

The Delaware with the tomahawk spoke in Blackfoot. "We should kill him now." He looked at the white man's face, and then, reluctantly, put away his tomahawk.

Broken Face came then. Not far behind him were the mules packed with trade goods for the summer meeting. Long ago a Cheyenne lance had struck Broken Face in the corner of his mouth, crashing through below his ear. Now he never spoke directly before him but always to one side, half whispering. His eyes were the color of smoke from a lodge on a rainy day, wise from having seen many things in the mountains. He put tobacco in his mouth. He looked at Little Belly coldly.

"One of old Thunder's Bloods," he said. "Why didn't you let the Delawares have him, Stearns?"

"I intended to, until I saw how tough he was."

"All Blackfeet are tough." Broken Face spat.

Little Belly studied the two men. The Broken Face was wise and strong, and the Blackfeet had not killed him yet; but already there were signs that the weakness of mercy was

stirring in his mind. It was said that Broken Face did not kill unless attacked. Looking into Stearns' pale eyes, Little Belly knew that Stearns would kill any time.

"Couldn't you use him?" Stearns asked.

Broken Face shook his head.

Stearns held up the bloody stub of arrow. He smiled. "No gratitude?"

"Hell!" Broken Face said. "He'd pay you by slicing your liver. He's Blackfoot. Leave him to the Delawares."

"What will they do?"

"Throw him on a fire, maybe. Kill him by inches. Cut the meat off his bones and throw the bones in the river. The Bloods did that to one of them last summer." Broken Face walked to his horse.

"Couldn't you use him to get into Blackfoot country peacefully?" Stearns asked. "Sort of a hostage?"

"No. Any way you try to use a Blackfoot he don't shine at all." Broken Face got on his horse, studying the long ridges ahead. "Likely one of the Crows that was with us put the arrow into him. Too bad they didn't do better. He's no good to us. Blackfeet don't make treaties, and if they did, they wouldn't hold to 'em. They just don't shine no way, Stearns. Come on."

Not by the words, but by the darkening of the Delawares' eyes, Little Belly knew it was death. He thought of words to taunt the Delawares while they killed him; and then he remembered he had a mission. To die bravely was easy; but to steal powerful medicine was greatness.

Little Belly looked to Stearns for mercy. The white man had saved him from the Delawares, and had cut the arrow from his shoulder; but those two deeds must have been matters of curiosity only. Now there was no mercy in the white man's eyes. In one quick instant Little Belly and Stearns saw the utter ruthlessness of each other's natures.

Stearns was greater than Broken Face, Little Belly saw, for Stearns made no talk. He merely walked away.

The Delawares freed their knives. "Is the Blackfoot a great runner?" one asked.

In his own tongue Little Belly spoke directly to Broken Face. "I would travel with you to my home."

"The Crows would not thank me." Broken Face began to ride away, with Stearns beside him.

"Is the Blackfoot cold?" A Delaware began to kick apart a rotten log to build a fire.

"I am one," Little Belly said. "Give me back my knife and I will fight all of Broken Face's Indians! Among my people Broken Face would be treated so."

"What did he say?" Stearns asked Broken Face.

Broken Face told him. He let his horse go a few more paces and then he stopped. For an instant an anger of indecision twisted the good side of Broken Face's mouth. "Let him go. Let him travel with us."

The ring of Delawares was angry, but they obeyed.

It had been so close that Little Belly felt his limbs trembling; but it had worked: deep in Broken Face was softness that had grown since his early days in the mountains because he now loved beaver hides more than strength. Now he was a warrior with too many ponies.

Little Belly pushed between the Delawares and began to gather up the items from his medicine pouch. It shamed him, but if he did not do so, he thought they might wonder too much and guess the nature of his cunning.

Jarv Yancey — Broken Face — said to Stearns, "You saved his hide in the first place. Now you can try to watch him while he's with us. It'll teach you something."

Stearns grinned. "I didn't know him from a Crow, until the Delawares told me. You know Blackfeet. Why'd *you* let him go?"

Broken Face's scowl showed that he was searching for an answer to satisfy himself. "Someday the Blackfeet may catch me. If they give me a running chance, that's all I'll want. Maybe this will help me get it."

"They'll break your legs with a club before they give you that running chance." Stearns laughed.

There was startled shrewdness in the look the Mountain Man gave the greenhorn making his first trip to the Rockies. "You learn fast, Stearns."

"The Scots are savages at heart, Yancey. They know another savage when they see him. Our wounded friend back there has a heart blacker than a beaten Macdonald trapped in a marsh. I took several glances to learn it, but I saw it."

The Delawares rode by at the trot, scattering to go on ahead and on the flanks as scouts. Neither Stearns nor Yancey looked back to see what was happening to Little Belly.

## III

Ahead, the whispering blue of the mountains rose above the clear green of the ridges. There were parks and rushing rivers yet to cross, a world to ride forever. Behind, the mules with heavy packs, the *engagées* cursing duty, the wool-clad trappers riding with rifles aslant gave reason for Jarv Yancey's presence. As Stearns looked through the sun-tangled air to long reaches of freshness, a joyous, challenging expression was his reason for being here.

Just for a while Yancey thought back to a time when he, too, looked with new eyes on a new world every morning; but now the ownership of goods, and the employment of trappers and flunkies, gave caution to his looks ahead. And he had given refuge to a Blackfoot, which would be an insult to the friendly Crows, an error to be mended with gifts.

Stearns spoke lazily. "When he said, 'I am one,' it touched you, didn't it, Yancey? That's why you didn't let the Delawares have him."

Jarv Yancey grunted.

The Blackfoot walked with hunger in his belly and a great weakness in his legs, but he walked. The horses of the trappers kicked dust upon him. The *engagées* cursed him, but he did not understand the words. He could not be humble, but he was patient.

And now he changed his plan. The Broken Face was not as great as the other white man who rode ahead, although the other was a stranger in the mountains. The cruel calmness of the second white man's eyes showed that he was protected by mighty medicine. Little Belly would steal greatness from him, instead of from Broken Face.

There would be time; it was far to the edge of Blackfoot country.

The one called Stearns took interest in Little Belly, learning from him some Blackfoot speech through talking slowly with the signs. Little Belly saw that it was the same interest Stearns took in plants that were strange to him, in birds, in the rocks of the land. It was good, for Little Belly was studying Stearns also.

It was Stearns who saw that Little Belly got a mule to ride. Also, because of Stearns, the Delawares quit stepping on Little Belly's healing shoulder and stopped stripping the blanket from him when they walked by his sleeping place at night.

There was much to pay the Delawares, and there was much to pay all the white men, too, but Little Belly buried insults deep and drew within himself, living only to discover the medicine that made Stearns strong.

By long marches the trappers came closer to the mountains. One day the Crows who had ridden near Little Belly when he lay in the rocks came excitedly into the camp at nooning, waving scalps. The scalps were those of No Horns and Whirlwind. Little Belly showed a blank face when the Crows taunted him with the trophies. They rode around him, shouting insults, until they had worked up rage to kill him.

The Broken Face spoke to them sharply, and their pride was wounded. They demanded why this ancient enemy of all their people rode with the friends of the Crows. They were howlers then, like old women, moaning of their hurts, telling of their love for Broken Face and all white trappers.

Broken Face must make the nooning longer then, to sit in council with the Crows. He told how this Blackfoot with him had once let him go in peace. The Crows did not understand, even if they believed. He said that Little Belly would speak to his people about letting Broken Face come into their lands to trap. The Crows did not understand, and it was certain they did not believe.

Then Broken Face gave presents. The Crows understood, demanding more presents.

Dark was the look the white trap-

per chief gave Little Belly when the Crows at last rode away. But Stearns laughed and struck Broken Face upon the shoulder. Later, the Blackfoot heard the Delawares say that Stearns had said he would pay for the presents.

That was nothing, Little Belly knew; Stearns gave the Delawares small gifts, also, when they brought him plants or flowers he had not seen before, or birds they killed silently with arrows. It might be that Stearns was keeping Little Belly alive to learn about his medicine. The thought startled him.

## IV

Now the mountains were losing their blue haze. At night the air was like a keen blade. Soon the last of the buffalo land would lie behind. There was a tightening of spirit. There were more guards at night, for the land of the Blackfeet was not far ahead. With pride, Little Belly saw how the camp closed in upon itself by night because his people were not far away.

And still he did not know about the medicine.

Once he had thought it was hidden in a pouch from which Stearns took every day thin, glittering knives to cut the hair from his face, leaving only the heavy streak across his upper lip. On a broad piece of leather Stearns sharpened the knives, and he was very careful with them.

But he did not care who saw them or who saw how he used them; so it was not the knives, Little Belly decided. All day Stearns' gun was busy. He brought in more game than any of the hunters, and since he never made sky talk before a hunt, the Blackfoot became convinced that his powerful medicine was carried on his body.

At last Little Belly settled on a shining piece of metal which Stearns carried always in his pocket. It was like a ball that had been flattened. There were lids upon it, thin and gleaming, with talking signs marked on them. They opened like the wings of a bird.

On top of it was a small stem. Every night before he slept Stearns took the round metal from his pocket. With his fingers he twisted the small stem, looking solemn. His actions caused the flattened ball to talk with a slow grasshopper song. And then Stearns would look at the stars, and immediately push the lids down on the object and put it back into his pocket, where it was fastened by a tiny yellow rope of metal.

This medicine was never farther from Stearns' body than the shining rope that held it. He was very careful when the object lay in his hand. No man asked him what it was, but often when Stearns looked at his medicine, the trappers glanced at the sky.

Little Belly was almost satisfied; but still, he must be sure.

One of the *engagées* was a French-

man who had worked for the English fathers west of Blackfoot country. Little Belly began to help him with the horses in the daytime. The Broken Face scowled at this, not caring for any kind of Indians near his horses. But the company was still in Crow country, and Little Belly hated Crows, and it was doubtful that the Blackfoot could steal the horses by himself, so Broken Face, watchful, wondering, allowed Little Belly to help the Frenchman.

After a time Little Belly inquired carefully of the *engagée* about the metal ball that Stearns carried. The Frenchman named it, but the word was strange, so Little Belly soon forgot it. The *engagée* explained that the moon and stars and the sun and the day and night were all carried in the metal.

There were small arrows in the medicine. They moved and the medicine was alive, singing a tiny song. The *engagée* said one glance was all Stearns needed to know when the moon would rise, when the sun would set, when the day would become night and the night would turn to day.

These things Little Belly could tell without looking at a metal ball. Either the Frenchman was a liar or the object Stearns carried was worthless. Little Belly grew angry with himself, and desperate; perhaps Stearns' medicine was not in the silvery object after all.

All through the last of the buffalo lands bands of Crows came to the company, professing love for the Broken Face, asking why a Blackfoot traveled with him. The trapper chief gave them awls and bells and trinkets and small amounts of poor powder.

He complained to Stearns, "That stinking Blood has cost me twenty dollars in goods, St. Louis!"

Stearns laughed. "I'll stand it."

"Why?"

"He wants to kill me. I'd like to know why. I've never seen a man who wanted so badly to kill me. It pleases me to have an enemy like that."

Broken Face shook his head.

"Great friends and great enemies, Yancey. They make life worth living; and the enemies make it more interesting by far."

The Mountain Man's gray eyes swept the wild land ahead. "I agree on that last." After a while he said, "Besides wanting to kill you, like he said, which he would like to do to any white man, what does he want? There was three of them back there where the Delawares found him. He didn't have no cause to be left behind, not over one little arrow dabbed into him. He joined us, Stearns."

"I don't know why, but I know what he wants now." Stearns showed his teeth in a great streaking grin. "I love an enemy that can hate all the way, Yancey."

"If that makes you happy, you can have the whole damned Black-

foot nation to love, lock, stock and barrel." After a time Yancey began to laugh at his own remark.

## V

Little Belly was close to Stearns the evening the grizzly bear disrupted the company, at a bad time, when camp was being made. There was a crashing on the hill where two *engagées* were gathering wood. One of them shouted. The other fired his rifle.

The coughing of an enraged bear came loudly from the bushes. The *engagées* leaped down the hill, throwing away their rifles. Little Belly looked at Stearns. The big white man was holding his medicine. He had only time to snap the lids before grabbing his rifle from where it leaned against a pack. The medicine swung on its golden rope against his thigh as he cocked his rifle.

Confusion ran ahead of the enormous silver bear that charged the camp. The mules wheeled away, kicking, dragging loosened packs. The horses screamed and ran. Men fell over the scattered gear, cursing and yelling as they scrambled for their guns. There were shots and some of them struck the bear without effect.

Thundering low, terrible with power, the grizzly came. Now only Stearns and Little Belly stood in its path, and the Blackfoot was without weapons. Little Belly fought with terror but he stayed because Stearns stayed. The white man's lips smiled but his eyes were like the ice upon the winter mountains.

Wide on his feet he stood, with his rifle not all the way to his shoulder. Tall and strong he stood, as if to stop the great bear with his body. Little Belly covered his mouth.

When Stearns fired, the bear was so close Little Belly could see the surging of its muscles on the shoulder hump and the stains of berries on its muzzle. It did not stop at the sound of Stearns' rifle, but it was dead, for its legs fell under it, no longer driving. It slid almost to Stearns' feet, bruising the grass, jarring rocks.

For a moment there was silence. Stearns poured his laugh into the quiet, a huge deep laugh that was happy, wild and savage as the mountains. He looked at his medicine then, solemnly. He held it to his ear, and then he smiled and put it back into his pocket. He stooped to see how his bullet had torn into the bear's brain through the eye.

There was still confusion, for the mules and horses did not like the bear smell, but Stearns paid no attention. He looked at Little Belly standing there with nothing in his hands. Stearns did not say the Blackfoot was brave, but his eyes said so. Once more he laughed, and then he turned to speak to Broken Face, who had been at the far end of camp when the bear came.

One of the *engagées* shot the bear in the neck. Broken Face knocked the man down for wasting powder and causing the animals more fright.

Quickly Little Belly left to help with the horses, hiding all his thoughts. Truly, this medicine of Stearns' was powerful. Little Belly could say that Stearns was brave, that he shot true, standing without fear, and laughing afterward. All this was true, but still there was the element of medicine which protected a brave warrior against all enemies. Without it, bravery was not enough. Without it, the most courageous warrior might die from a shot not even aimed at him. In the round thing Stearns carried was trapped all movement of the days and nights and a guiding of the owner in war and hunting.

Now Little Belly was sure about the object, but as he pondered deep into the night, his sureness wore to caution. He could not remember whether Stearns listened to the talk of his medicine before the bear made sounds upon the hill or after the shouts and crashing began.

So Little Belly did not push his plan hard yet. He watched Stearns, wondering, waiting for more evidence. Sometimes the white man saw the hard brown eyes upon him as he moved about the camp, and when he did he showed his huge grin.

Three days from the vague boundary of ridges and rivers that marked the beginning of Blackfoot lands, the Delaware scouts reported buffalo ahead. At once the camp was excited. Broken Face looked at the hills around him, and would not let more than a few ride ahead to hunt.

Stearns borrowed a Sioux bow and arrows from one of the Delawares. He signalled to Little Belly. Riding beside Stearns, the Blackfoot went out to hunt. With them were the Delawares, Broken Face, and a few of the trappers. When Broken Face first saw the weapons Little Belly carried he spoke sharply to Stearns, who laughed.

Little Belly's mule was not for hunting buffalo, so the Blackfoot did not go with the others to the head of the valley where the animals were. He went, instead, to the lower end, where he would have a chance to get among the buffalo when the other hunters drove them. The plan was good. When the buffalo came streaming down the valley, the startled mule was caught among them and had to run with them, or be crushed.

In the excitement Little Belly forgot everything but that he was a hunter. He rode and shouted, driving his arrows through the lungs of fat cows. He could not guide his mount, for it was terror-stricken by the dust and noise and shock of huge brown bodies all around it. When there was a chance the mule ran straight up a hill and into the trees in spite of all that Little Belly could do to turn it.

He saw Stearns still riding, on through the valley and to a plain beyond where the buffalo still ran. Little Belly had one arrow left. He tried to ride after Stearns, but the mule did not like the valley and was stubborn about going into it. By the

time the Blackfoot got steady movement from his mount, Stearns was coming back to where Broken Face and some of the other hunters were riding around a wounded bull that charged them in short rushes.

Down in the valley, Stearns said to Yancey, "That bull has a dozen bullets in him!"

"He can take three dozen." Yancey looked up the hill toward Little Belly. "Your Blackfoot missed a good chance to light out."

Stearns was more interested in the wounded buffalo at the moment. The hunters were having sport with it, running their horses at it. Occasionally a man put another shot into it. With purple blood streaming from its mouth and nostrils, rolling its woolly head, the bull defied them to kill it. Dust spouted from its sides when bullets struck. The buffalo bellowed, more in anger than in pain.

"How long can it last?" Stearns asked, amazed.

"A long time," Yancey said. "I've seen 'em walk away with a month's supply of good galena."

"I can kill it in one minute.

Yancey shook his head. "Not even that guns of yours."

"One shot."

"Don't get off your horse, you damned fool!"

Stearns was already on the ground. "One minute, Yancey." He looked at his watch. He walked toward the bull.

Red-eyed, with lowered head, the buffalo watched him. It charged. Stearns fired one barrel. It was nothing. The bull came on. Stearns fired again. The buffalo went down, and like the bear, it died almost at Stearns' feet.

"You damned fool!" Yancey said. "You shot it head-on!"

Stearns laughed. "Twice. For a flash, I didn't think that second one would do the work."

Little Belly had seen. There was no doubt now: Stearns had made medicine with the round thing and it had given him power to do the impossible.

The hunters began to butcher cows. Fleet horses stood without riders. Little Belly had one arrow left, and Stearns was now apart from the others, examining the dead bull. But when the Blackfoot reached the valley Broken Face was once more near Stearns, with his rifle slanting toward Little Belly.

"Take that arrow he's got left," Yancey said.

Stearns did so. "I was going to give him his chance."

"You don't give a Blackfoot any chance!" Yancey started away. "There's other arrows sticking in some of the cows he shot. Remember that, Stearns."

Little Belly did not understand the words, but the happy challenge of Stearns' smile was clear enough.

They went together to one of the cows Little Belly had killed. The white man cut the arrow from its lungs. He put the arrow on the

ground and then he walked a few paces and laid his rifle on the grass. He looked at Little Belly, waiting.

The white man still had his medicine. It was too strong for Little Belly; but otherwise, he would not have been afraid to take the opportunity offered him. He tossed his bow toward the mule. The white man was disappointed.

They ate of the steaming hot liver of the cow, looking at each other while they chewed.

## VI

That night the company of Broken Face feasted well, ripping with their teeth, the great, rich pieces of dripping hump rib as they squatted at the fires. Little Belly ate with the rest, filling his belly, filling his mind with the last details of his plan.

When the stars were cold above, he rose from his blanket and went to the fire. He roasted meat, looking toward the outer rim of darkness where Stearns slept near Broken Face. Then, without stealth, Little Belly went through the night to where the French *engagée* guarded one side of the horse corral.

The Frenchman saw him coming from the fire and was not alarmed. Little Belly held out the meat. The man took it with one hand, still holding to his rifle. After a time the guard squatted down, using both hands to hold the rib while he ate. Little Belly's hand trailed through the dark, touching the stock of the gun that leaned against the man's leg.

The *engagée* smacked his lips. The meat was still against his beard when Little Belly snatched the gun and swung it. Quite happy the Frenchman died, eating good fat cow. Little Belly took his knife at once. He crouched, listening. The rifle barrel had made sound. Moments later, the horses shifting inside their rope enclosure made sound also.

Little Belly started back to the fire, and then he saw that two trappers had risen and were roasting meat. He put the knife at the back of his belt and went forward boldly. He picked up his blanket and threw it around him. He lay down near Stearns and Broken Face.

One of the trappers said, "Was that Blackfoot sleeping there before?"

Grease dripped from the other trapper's chin as he looked across the fire. "Don't recall. I know I don't want him sleeping near me. I been uneasy ever since that Blood took up with us."

After the white men had eaten they went back to their blankets. The camp became quiet. For a long time Little Belly watched the cold star-fires in the sky, and listened to the breathing of Stearns.

Then, silent as the shadows closing on the dying fire, the Blackfoot moved. At last, on his knees beside Stearns, with the knife in one hand, Little Belly's fingers walked beneath the blanket until they touched and gripped the metal rope of Stearns' great medicine. To kill the owner

before taking his medicine would mean the power of it would go with his spirit to another place.

Little Belly's fingers clutched the chain. The other hand swung the knife high.

Out of the dark came a great fist. It smashed against Little Belly's forehead. It flung him back upon the ground. The white stars flashed in his brain, and he did not know that he held the medicine in his hand.

Stearns was surging up. Broken Face was out of his blanket in an instant. The hammer of his rifle clicked. Little Belly rolled away, bumping into packs of trade goods. He leaped up and ran. A rifle gushed. The bullet sought him. He heard it tear a tree. He ran. The medicine bumped his wrist. Great was Little Belly's exultation.

Stearns' rifle boomed twice, the bullets growling close to Little Belly; but now nothing could harm him. The great medicine was in his hand, and his legs were fleet.

The camp roared. Above it all, Little Belly heard Stearns' mighty laugh. The white man had not yet discovered his terrible loss, Little Belly thought. Stearns and maybe others would follow him now, deep into the lands of his own people.

When day came Little Belly saw no signs that Stearns or any of the white men were pursuing him. It occurred to him that they were afraid to do so, now that he had stolen their greatest power.

The medicine was warm. All night he had carried it in his hand, sometimes listening with awe to the tiny talk it made. It frightened him to think of opening the lids, but he knew he must do so; this medicine that lived must look into his face and know who owned it now. He pried one lid open. There was another with a carved picture of a running horse and talking signs that curved like grass in the wind.

Now Little Belly knew why Stearns' horse had been more powerful and fleeter than any owned by other members of Broken Face's company.

Little Belly opened the second lid. His muscles jerked. He grunted. Golden talking signs looked at him from a white face. There were two long pointing arrows, and a tiny one that moved about a small circle. The song of the medicine was strong and steady, talking of the winds that blew across the mountains, telling of the stars that flowed in the summer sky, telling of the coming and going of the moon and sun.

Here was captured the power of strong deeds, held in the mysterious whispering of the medicine. Now Little Belly would be great forever among the Blackfeet, and his people would be great.

The age-old longing of all men to control events that marched against them was satisfied in Little Belly. He pushed the lids together. He held the medicine in both hands, looking at the sky.

In his pouch was his old medicine that sometimes failed, the dried eye of a mountain lion, a blue feather that had fallen in the forest when Little Belly had seen no bird near, a bright green rock shaped like the head of a pony, the claw of an eagle, and other things.

Little Belly did not throw away the old medicine. It could help the new and make it even stronger.

## VII

When the sun was straight above, the Crows were on his trail. He saw all three of them when they rode across a park. His first thought was to run hard, staying in the heavy timber where their ponies could not go. He had learned that on his first war party against the Crows long ago.

One of the enemies would stay on Little Belly's trail. The others would circle around to keep him from reaching the next ridge. It was a matter of running fast. Little Belly started. He stopped, remembering that he had powerful medicine.

He took it from his pouch and looked at it, as Stearns had done before he killed the bear, before he killed the great buffalo. The medicine made its steady whisper in the silent forest. It told Little Belly that he was greater than all enemies.

So he did not run. He went back on his own trail and hid behind a log. No jay warned of his presence. No squirrel shouted at him. His medicine kept them silent. And his medicine brought the Crow, leading his pony, straight to Little Belly.

While the Crow was turning, Little Belly was over the log with his knife. Quickly, savagely, he struck. A few minutes later he had a scalp, a heavy musket, another knife, and a pony. He gave fierce thanks to his medicine.

Little Belly rode into the open below one end of the ridge. The Crow circling there saw him and came to the edge of the trees. Little Belly knew him at once, Thunder Coming, a young war chief of the Crows. They taunted each other. Little Belly waved the fresh scalp. Thunder Coming rode into the open to meet his enemy. Out of rifleshot, they ran their ponies around each other, yelling more insults.

At last they rode toward each other. Both fired their rifles and missed. At once Thunder Coming turned his horse and rode away to reload.

Little Belly would have done the same, except that he knew how strong his medicine was. He raced after Thunder Coming. The Crow was startled by this breach of custom, but when he realized that he was running from one who chased him, he started to swing his pony in a great circle to come back.

The Blackfoot knew what was in Thunder Coming's mind then. The Crow expected them to try to ride close to each other, striking coup, not to kill but to gain glory.

Little Belly allowed it to start that way. Then he swerved his

pony, and instead of striking lightly and flashing past, he crashed into Thunder Coming, and swung the musket like a war club.

Thunder Coming died because he believed in the customs of war between Blackfeet and Crows; but Little Belly knew he died because of medicine he could not stand against. There was meat in Thunder Coming's pouch. That, along with his scalp, was welcome.

For a while Little Belly stayed in the open, waiting for the third Crow to appear. The last enemy did not come. Although the Blackfoot's medicine was great this day, he did not care to wait too long in Crow country. He went home with two Crow scalps and two Crow ponies.

The young men called him brave. The old chiefs were pleased. Little Belly boasted of his medicine. With it, he sang, the white men could be swept from the hills. The Blackfeet became excited, ready for battle. The women wailed against the coming bloodshed.

Each night when the first stars came Little Belly talked to his medicine, just as he had seen Stearns do; but the Blackfoot did not let others see him when he twisted the small stalk that protruded from the flattened ball. The medicine made a tiny whirring noise to show that it was pleased.

While the Blackfeet made ready for war, sending scouts to report each day on the progress of Broken Face and his company, Little Belly guarded his medicine jealously. It was living medicine. It was what the white men would not reveal to the Nez Perces who had sent chiefs down the muddy river. Little Belly had not gone begging white men to tell what made them powerful; he had stolen the secret honorably.

Now he had the strength of a bear and the wisdom of a beaver. His fight against the Crows had proved how mighty was his medicine. With it he would be great, and the Blackfeet would be great because he could lead them to victory against all enemies.

It was right that he should begin by leading them against the trappers. Let the old chiefs sit upon a hill. Every day the scouts returned, telling how carefully the white men held their camps. The scouts named men they had seen in the company, strong warriors who had fought the Blackfeet before.

Thunder and the old chiefs were thoughtful. They agreed it was right for Little Belly to lead the fight.

At last the Blackfeet rode to war.

## VIII

For several days Jarv Yancey had been worried. The Delaware outriders were not holding far from the line of travel now; they had seen too much spying from the hills, and this was Blackfoot country.

"How do they usually come at you?" Stearns asked.

"When you're not looking for 'em," Yancey said.

"Would they hit a company this big?"

"We'll find out."

Stearns laughed. "Maybe I'll get my watch back."

"Be more concerned with holding onto your hair."

The trappers camped that night in a clump of timber with open space all around it. Yancey sent the guards out into the open, and they lay there in the moonlight, peering across the wet grass, watching for movement from the black masses of the hills. The silence of the mountains rested hard upon them that night.

Cramped and wet, those who stood the early morning watch breathed more easily when dawn came sliding from the sky and brought no stealthy rustling of the grass, no shrieks of bullets.

All that day, the Delawares, on the flanks and out ahead and on the backtrail, seemed to be crowding closer and closer to the caravan. They knew; they smelled it. And Yancey and the other trappers could smell it too. Stearns was quieter than usual, but not subdued. His light blue eyes smiled into the fire that night before he went out to take his turn at guard.

The trappers watched him keenly. They knew how joyfully he risked his neck against big game, doing foolish things. The Bloods were something else.

Mandan Ingalls was satisfied. He said to Sam Williams, "He don't scare for nothing. He's plumb anxious to tackle the Bloods. He'd rather fight than anything."

"He come to the right country for it," Williams said.

That night a nervous *engagée* fired his rifle at a shadow. Without shouting or confusion, the camp was up and ready in a moment. Then men cursed and went back to bed, waiting for the next disturbance. The old heads remembered the war cries of the Blackfeet, the ambushes of the past, and friends long dead. Remembering, the veterans slept well while they could.

When the moon was gone Little Belly led four young men in to stampede the white men's horses. They came out of a spit of timber and crawled to a winding stream. Close to the bank, overhung with grass, they floated down the creek as silently as drifting logs.

They rose above the bank and peered fiercely through the darkness. The smell of animals close by told Little Belly how well his medicine had directed him. A guard's rifle crashed before they were among the horses. After that there was no more shooting, for Broken Face himself was at the corral, shouting orders.

In addition to the rope enclosure around the animals, they were tied together, and then picketed to logs buried in the earth. So while there was a great kicking and thumping and snorting, Little Belly and his companions were able to run with

only the horses they cut loose.

But still, it was good. The raiders returned to the main war party with ten animals.

Remembering the uproar and stumbling about when the bear charged the trappers as they prepared to rest, Little Belly set the attack for evening, when Broken Face would be making camp. Two hundred warriors were ready to follow the Blackfoot war chief.

The scouts watched the trappers. The Blackfeet moved with them, staying on the trees on the hills. A few young men tried to surprise the Delawares, but the white men's scouts were wary. In the afternoon Little Belly thought he knew where the trappers would stop, in an open place near a small stand of trees. They did not trust the dark forest, now that they knew the Blackfoot were watching.

Little Belly went to make his medicine.

He opened the lids to look upon the white face with the shining talking signs. Upon the mirror of the medicine was a drop of water, left from last night's swimming in the creek. Little Belly blew it away. His face was close to the medicine. The tiny arrow was not moving. Quickly, he put the round thing to his ear.

There was no whispering. The medicine had died.

Little Belly was frightened. He remembered how Stearns had laughed through the darkness when Little Belly was running away with the round thing. There was trickery in the medicine, for it had died as soon as Little Belly sought its strength to use against white men.

The Blackfoot let the medicine fall. It struck the earth with a solid thump. He stared at it, half expecting to see it run away. And then he saw the tiny arrow was moving again.

Little Belly knelt and held the round thing in his hands. It was alive once more. He heard the talking of the power inside, the power of white men who smiled when they fought. Once more that strength was his. Now he was warm again and his courage was sound.

Even as he watched, the arrow died.

In desperation, with all the memories of Blackfoot sorrows running in his mind, Little Belly tried to make the medicine live. He talked to it by twisting the stalk. For a time the medicine was happy. It sang. The tiny arrow moved. But it died soon afterward. Little Belly twisted the stalk until the round thing choked, and the stalk would not turn any more.

He warmed the medicine, cupping it in his hands against his breast. Surely warmth would bring it back to life; but when he looked again there was no life.

He was savage then. This was white man's medicine, full of trickery and deceit. Little Belly hurled it away.

He went back to the Blackfoot

warriors, who watched him with sharp eyes. Wind Eater said, "We are ready."

Looking through a haze of hate and fear, Little Belly looked below and saw that Stearns was riding with the lead scouts. "It is not time yet." The spirit of the medicine had fled back to Stearns.

"We are ready," Wind Eater said.

Little Belly went away to make medicine, this time with the items in his pouch. He did many things. He burned a pinch of tobacco. It made a curl of white smoke in the shape of death.

Yesterday, it would have been death for Blackfoot enemies. Now, Little Belly could not read his medicine and be sure. After a while he went back to the others again. They were restless.

"The white men will camp soon."

"Is not Little Belly's medicine strong?"

"The Broken Face will not be caught easily once he is camped."

"Is not Little Belly's medicine good?" Wind Eater asked.

"It is strong." Little Belly boasted, and they believed him. But his words struck from an emptiness inside. It seemed that he had thrown away his strength with the round thing. In desperation he considered going back to look for it. Maybe it had changed and was talking once more.

"We wait," Wind Eater said. "If Little Belly does not wish to lead us —"

"We go," Little Belly said.

He led the warriors down the hill.

The length of Little Belly's waiting on the hill while dark doubts chilled him was the margin by which the Blackfoot charge missed catching the trappers as the bear had caught them. Little Belly saw that it was so. The thought gave fury to his movement, and if he had been followed to where he rode, the Blackfeet could have overrun the camp in one burst.

They knocked the Delawares back upon the main company. Straight at the camp the Blackfeet thundered, shrieking, firing muskets and arrows. The first shock of surprise was their advantage. The *engagées* leaped for the clump of timber, forgetting all else. The trappers fired. While they were reloading Little Belly urged his followers to carry over them.

He himself got into the camp and fired his musket into the bearded face of a trapper standing behind a mule to reload his rifle. But there was no Blackfoot then at Little Belly's back. All the rest had swerved and were screaming past the camp.

Little Belly had to run away, and he carried the picture of Stearns, who had stood and watched him without firing his two-barrelled rifle when he might have.

The Broken Face gave orders. His men ran the mules and horses into the little stand of trees. They piled packs to lie behind. Broken Face rallied the *engagées.*

It was a fort the Blackfeet tried

to ride close to the second time. The rifles of the trappers slammed warriors from the backs of racing ponies.

There would never be a rush directly into the trees, and Little Belly knew it. The fight might last for days now, but in the end, the white men, who could look calmly on the faces of their dead and still keep fighting, would win. They would not lose interest. The power of their medicine would keep them as dangerous four days from now as they were at the moment.

The Blackfeet were not unhappy. They had seen two dead white men carried into the trees, and another crawling there with wounds. There were four dead warriors; but the rest could ride around the trees for a long time, shooting, yelling, killing a few more trappers. And when the Indians tired and went away, it would take them some time to remember that they had not won.

All this Little Belly realized, and he was not happy. True, his medicine had saved him from harm even when he was among the mules and packs; but if the white man's medicine had not betrayed him before the fight, then all the other warriors would have followed close upon him and the battle would be over.

He rode out and stopped all the young men who were racing around the trees, just out of rifleshot. He made them return to the main body of warriors.

"I will kill the Broken Face," Little Belly said.

Wind Eater smiled. "By night?"

"Now. When it is done the others will be frightened with no one to lead them. They will be caught among the trees and we will kill them all." His words were not quite true, Little Belly realized. The men who rode with Broken Face would not fall apart over his death, but an individual victory would prove how strong the Blackfeet were; and then they might go all the way in, as Little Belly had fought Thunder Coming, the Crow war chief.

Cold-seated in Little Belly's reason was the knowledge that one determined charge into the trees would end everything; but a voice whispered, *If the medicine is good.*

Signalling peace, Little Belly rode alone toward the trees. The Broken Face came alone to meet him.

"Before the sun dies I will fight Broken Face here." Little Belly made a sweeping motion with his hand. He saw blood on the sleeve of the white man's shirt, but Broken Face held the arm as if it were not wounded. Little Belly knew that fear had never lived behind the maimed features of the man who watched him coldly.

"When you are dead the Blackfeet will go away?" Broken Face asked.

"If the white men go away when you are dead."

Broken Face's mouth was solemn but a smile touched his eyes briefly. "There will be a fight between us." He went back to the trees.

When Stearns knew what had been said, he grinned. "High diplomacy with no truth involved."

"That's right," Yancey said. "But killing Little Belly will take a heap of steam out of the rest."

"If you can do it."

Yancey was surprised. "I intend to."

"Your arm is hurt. Let me fight him," Stearns said.

Yancey bent his arm. The heavy muscles had been torn by a hunting arrow, but that was not enough to stop him. He looked at his packs, at mules and horses that would be fewer when the Bloods swept past again. Something in him dragged at the thought of going out. It was foolish; it was not sound business.

Casually he looked at his trappers. No matter what he did, they would not doubt his guts. Jarv Yancey's courage was a legend in the mountains and needed no proving against a miserable riled-up Blackfoot war chief. The decision balanced delicately in Yancey's mind. A man died with his partner, if the time came; and a man in command fought for those he hired, or he should not hire good men.

Yancey shook his head. "I'll do it."

Stearns said, "No." Yancey looked at him, stubbornness in his eyes and mind; then he looked again and saw in Stearn's face the fact that his courage would not be damaged by this. Only Stearns could fight this battle. His thoughts were echoed by the other man's next words, and he stepped back.

"It's my fault that Little Belly is still alive," Stearns said. He looked at Mandan Ingalls. "You might take a look at Yancey's arm while things are quiet."

Ingalls spat. "For a while after he comes to, you're going to be lucky to be somewhere with only a Blood to pester you. If you don't handle that Blackfoot, Stearns, you'd just as well stay out there."

Stearns laughed. He took his horse from the timber with a rush. Once in the open, looking at the solid rank of Blackfoot cavalry across the grass, he leaped down and adjusted his cinch. He waved his rifle at them, beckoning. He vaulted into the saddle and waited

The song of the dead medicine was in Little Belly's ears. It mocked him. Once more he had been tricked. Stearns, not Broken Face, was down there waiting. The power of the stolen medicine had gone through the air back to the man who owned it, and that was why the great one who laughed was waiting there, instead of Broken Face.

Silent were the ranks of Blackfeet and silent were the rifles of the trappers. Little Belly hesitated. The fierce eyes of his people turned toward him. In that instant Little Belly wondered how great he might have been without the drag of mystic thinking to temper his actions, for solid in him was a furious courage that could carry him at times with-

out the blessing of strong medicine.

He sent his pony rushing across the grass. He knew Stearns would wait until he was very close, as he had waited for the bear, as he had faced the wounded buffalo. Riding until he estimated that moment at hand, Little Belly fired his musket.

He saw Stearns' head jerk back. He saw the streak of blood that became a running mass on the side of the white man's face. But Stearns did not tumble from his horse. He shook his head like a cornered buffalo. He raised the rifle.

Stearns shot the pony under Little Belly. The Blackfoot felt it going down in full stride. He leaped, rolling over and over in the grass, coming to his feet unharmed. The empty musket was gone then. Little Belly had only his knife.

There was a second voice to the white man's rifle. The silent mouth of it looked down at Little Belly, but the rifle did not speak. Stearns thrust it into the saddle scabbard. He leaped from his horse and walked forward, drawing his own knife. The shining mass of blood ran down his cheek and to his neck. His lips made their thin smile and his eyes were like the ice upon the mountains.

It was then that Little Belly knew that nothing could kill the white man. It was then that Little Belly remembered that his own medicine had not been sure and strong. But still the Blackfoot tried. The two men came together with a shock, striking with the knives, trying with their free hands to seize the other's wrist.

Great was Stearns' strength. When he dropped his knife and grabbed Little Belly's arm with both hands, the Blackfoot could do nothing but twist and strain. The white man bent the arm. He shifted his weight suddenly, throwing his body against Little Belly, who went spinning on the ground with the knife gone from his hand and his shoulder nearly wrenched from its socket.

A roar came from the trees. The Blackfeet were silent. Stearns picked up Little Belly's knife.

Then, like the passing of a cloud, the cold deadliness was gone from Stearns. He held the knife, and Little Belly was sitting on the ground with one arm useless; but the white man did not know what to do with the knife. He threw it away suddenly. He reached out his hand, as if to draw Little Belly to his feet.

The trappers roared angrily. Stearns drew his hand back. Little Belly was no wounded buffalo, no charging bear; there was no danger in him now. Stearns did not know what to do with him. Seeing this, the Blackfoot knew that the greatest of white men were weak with mercy; but their medicine was so strong that their weakness was also strength.

Stearns went back to his horse.

"Shoot the stinking Blood!" a trapper yelled.

Stearns did nothing at all for a moment after he got on his horse.

He had forgotten Little Belly. Then a joyful light came to the white man's eyes. He laughed. The white teeth gleamed under the streak of red beard. He drew his rifle and held it high. Straight at the Blackfeet ranks he charged.

For an instant the Bloods were astounded; and then they shouted savagely. Their ponies came sweeping across the trampled grass. Stearns shot the foremost rider. Then the white man spun his horse and went flying back toward the trees, laughing all the way.

Wild with anger, the Blackfeet followed too far.

They raced past Little Belly and on against the rifle fire coming from the island of trees. They would crush into the camp, fling themselves from their ponies, and smash the white men down! But too many Blackfeet rolled from their ponies. The charge broke at the very instant it should have been pressed all the way.

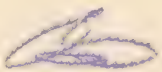
Little Belly saw this clearly. He knew that if he had been leading there would have been no difference.

His people were brave. They took their dead and wounded with them when they rode away from the steady fire of the trappers' rifles. They were brave, but they had wavered, and they had lost just when they should have won.

For one deep, clear moment Little Belly knew that medicine was nothing; but when he was running away with the rest of the warriors old heritage asserted itself: medicine was all. If the power of Stearns' round object, which could not be stolen for use against white men, had not turned Little Belly's bullet just enough to cause it to strike Stearns' cheek instead of his brain, the fight would have been much different.

Little Belly knew a great deal about white men now. They laughed because their medicine was so strong, so powerful they could spare a fallen enemy. But he would never be able to make his people understand, because they would remember Little Belly was the one who had been spared.

As he ran from the field he knew it would have been better for him if Stearns had not been strong with mercy, which was medicine too.



*Maurer had been a professional gunfighter for a long time, and killings meant nothing to him. But after the Blackburn shootout, he began to feel strange. . . .*

# The GUNNY

BY ROBERT TURNER

AFTER it was over, Maurer didn't look at Blackburn sprawled in the dust over the rutted, hard-packed dirt of Main Street. He stood there for a wild moment, feeling terribly tall, as though he were standing in the middle of a toy town, the clumps of wooden buildings around him only ankle-high and he all alone there like that. Then the feeling faded as fast as it had come.

Mechanically his small hands that had been holding the twin Colts loosely at his sides lifted them. He cleaned the smoke from the long barrels, replaced the spent slugs and slid the weapons back into their greased holsters. His tapering, sensitive fingers were steady. They always were. Maurer had been told that he had no nerves. He had long ago accepted that fact. The only thing was, tonight he felt more tired than usual. He knew he'd have to do something about this business of not sleeping so well. And his stomach bothered him a little. It felt weak, uncomfortable from not eating all day. That was something new, too, the not eating. But he'd fix all that tonight. A few drinks would give him an appetite. A good dinner, then one of these barroom floozies, and he'd sleep like a child.

Maurer turned toward the *Paradise*, the saloon across the street from where the trouble had started, a medium built man, all in black from flat-crowned Stetson to dust-filmed boots, good looking in a tight-featured, thin-cheeked sort of way. He didn't look at any of the men who had crowded out onto the verandah of the *Paradise*. He shouldered through the batwings, went straight to the bar and stood there, waiting for the fat, aproned barkeep to waddle back on the job.

He sipped slowly, almost daintily, at the hooker of red liquor that was set before him, and in the backbar mirror he watched the place fill up again, and listened to the flat clanginess of the piano that started up. He saw some of the men looking at his left shirt sleeve, at the hole Black-

burn's slug had picked there, just below the shoulder.

He faced straight ahead.

One of the men said: "Without that funny sideways twist of yours when you fire, that hole might be in a different place, Fred."

"Yes," Maurer admitted. He didn't look at the torn sleeve nor at the man who had spoken. He remembered the way twin puffs of dust had jumped from Blackburn's buttoned vest, only inches apart, and felt some satisfaction that he'd sized Blackburn rightly as more dangerous than some, and that he hadn't fooled with only one Colt, but had used cross fire. The other man wouldn't have missed with the next shot. Then Maurer stopped thinking about it. He never thought about these things after they were done. You couldn't do that.

One of the other men said something about the town being better off without Blackburn and it was about time somebody called him. He bet that Harry Gregg would be happy when he heard about this. Maurer bet he would, too. He put his hand in his pocket, onto the roll of money Gregg had given him to provoke a fight with Blackburn and kill him. He thought about how wise Gregg had been not to openly accuse the crooked faro dealer and fire him. Maurer knew that nobody except a pro like himself would have stood a chance against a man as fast and cool as Blackburn.

The second drink began to warm Maurer a little and the strange tiredness he'd felt lately swept over him heavily. The talking and laughing along the bar now that the piano had stopped seemed to fade into a dull blur. Maurer's eyes began to ache and he had trouble keeping them

open. The hand in his pocket clutched the money tightly. The roll of greenbacks seemed to swell and force his hand open and slowly fill up his whole pocket and he began to sweat at the notion of all that money. It was suddenly as though he had all in a lump all the pay he'd ever gotten for all the jobs he'd done for men like Gregg, and none of it had been thrown away. Enough money to set up in business as a gunsmith in 'Frisco the way he'd always figured he'd do some day.

Then the illusion faded and Maurer forced his fingers to uncramp from around the small roll of bills. He tossed the rest of his drink down fast and banged the hooker on the bar for another. Somehow, doing that broke the terrible tiredness that had seized him.

Three more shots, though, and he sensed something wrong. It wasn't taking hold. Not even on his empty stomach. Even the first warm glow was gone and he felt nothing, now. He should have been on the way to getting roaring drunk and getting hungry at last and looking over the women in the place. He wondered what was wrong.

Maurer turned his back to the bar and let his deep-set gray eyes wander around the smoke-filled room. There were four women there. They were all at tables with men. Maurer started toward the blonde one. He stood over the table, his hands limp at his sides, not looking at the man with the blonde, not knowing whether he was young or old, big or small. He said, softly:

"You got a room here?"

She had nice features but the paint was too thick on her face and her eyes were too moist and glittery-hard looking, but Maurer liked the way the top of her spangled gown had trouble controlling the swell of her breasts. Her eyes narrowed some at the corners and her full lips pulled in and set. Indignantly, she said:

"I'm already with a gentleman. We don't want any trouble. Vamoose."

"I didn't ask who you were with," Maurer said. "You've got a room, haven't you?"

Her eyes went over him, slowly, then came back to his face, held his gaze for long seconds, broke away, then came quickly back again. She didn't answer.

"Come on," Maurer said. "Let's go."

The man with her said: "Now, just a minute. I already bought this little gal some drinks. I —"

Still not looking at him, Maurer said: "You keep quiet." He reached into his pocket, separated a single bill, yanked it out and flung it on the table. He reached down and took the girl's wrist in his hand, gently. She looked away from him and down at the money on the table and then got up, pushing her chair back. She didn't try to get her wrist out of Maurer's hand as she led him toward a flight of stairs lead-

ing up to a balcony in the back of the saloon.

Just before they reached the stairs, they passed a poker table and Maurer heard a bearded freighter complaining about the slowness of the game. He was shuffling a deck of shiny cards. Without thinking about it, almost as though it was somebody else speaking, Maurer heard himself say: "You like fast action? I'll give you some. I need money to get to Frisco, fast. Cut you for high."

The freighter poked thick lips through his beard, looked Maurer over. "For how much?"

Maurer took the roll of bills from his pocket, peeled off a twenty and tossed the rest on the table. "For that," he said.

The other man looked at the money, then matched it with some of his own from the pile at his elbow. He shuffled the cards again, set them down for Maurer to cut. Maurer reached for them, wondering why he was doing this, why after every job he suddenly found himself gambling, crazily, when a moment before he hadn't even thought about it. He cut the cards and turned up a five of diamonds. He said: "Too bad. Five's my lucky number. You're licked." He felt exultation whipping through him, knowing that was so. Today was the fifth. That was why he'd put off the job on Blackburn two days, in spite of Gregg's big hurry. Nothing but good had ever happened to him on the fifth of the month.

He watched the bearded man cut the balance of the deck. Maurer didn't even feel nervous. He just felt impatient to get his hands on the money, stuff it into his pocket. He could hardly keep his hand from reaching out. Then he saw the freighter turn up the Queen of Spades. Sickness wrenched at Maurer and everything seemed to go away from him. He was suddenly standing there all alone. There were no people, no bar, no tables or chairs. Nothing but the four walls. No windows nor doors, even.

He said: "Well, you got your fast action. See you again." His voice seemed to echo in the emptiness around him.

The next thing he knew, he was standing in a box-sized room, looking down into the painted face of the blonde. She was saying something but he only heard the end of it: "— a queer one, all right, mister. But I like you. You're cute. Hell on a woman, too, I'll bet."

"Stop talking," Maurer said. "I didn't come up here to talk."

He watched her hunch her shoulders and let the top of the spangled gown start to slip down her upper arms. He felt nothing. Then her face seemed to change, to soften, and the short coils of yellow hair hanging down over her ears seemed to lengthen and become pigtails. Her face became the face of a thirteen-year-old girl, and it was twisted up and crying. The mouth was moving, screaming things at him, but no

sound was coming out. He knew what she was saying, though.

She was shrieking childish oaths at him for killing her father. He suddenly knew who she was, then. Burke's kid. That was in Rainy Flats. She had run screaming down the street after him. He'd learned later that she was the oldest of five and that Burke's wife was dead. He hadn't let it bother him long, though. That had been five years ago.

He said: "You've grown up, haven't you? But you don't fool me. Don't pretend you don't know who I am."

The figure in front of him blurred and then was again the blonde girl he'd met downstairs. She didn't look like the Burke kid at all, now, no matter how hard he worked to make her. She backed away from him, her arms crossed in front of her, her hands clasping her bared shoulders. Her lips were back from her teeth. She was shivering and her eyes were very wide.

"You'd better go," she said. Her voice trembled. "Your — your hands were like ice, like dead hands." She looked at them, still held out in front of him, in the position that they'd held her shoulders. "I don't like you. I don't like the way you look at me. Leave me alone."

Maurer started toward her to hit her but it seemed to take an eternity to make one step and he suddenly didn't care, was too tired to care about any of this. He just wanted to sleep. He turned and went out of her room and downstairs and the noises from the saloon broke over him in strange-sounding waves. He went out of the Paradise and a block up the street toward the hotel. He took a room and went up to it.

He undressed and stood in his long underwear, looking down at the the two ten dollar bills he'd put on the dresser. "I'll have to work again real soon," he told himself. He became aware of a sour smell that was himself; and of the fact that his underclothing was dingy and stiff-looking. It surprised him to remember that he hadn't really bathed or changed his clothes in over a week. He couldn't understand that. He'd always prided himself on his cleanliness. Girls had always liked that about him, commented on it.

Maurer flung himself on the bed, after turning off the kerosene lamp. The room was very dark. No light came through the lone window. He figured it must open onto an alley. He tried to make his mind a blank so he could fall asleep fast. But again, tonight, it didn't work. It hadn't worked for a week now. Then he gave up and thoughts flooded his mind, tumbling, disjointed.

He thought about his Quaker mother. He could see her gaunt, work-worn face under the shadowing bonnet as she read the big family Bible after dinner, after twelve hours of fighting, in vain, to keep the stock alive after a Montana blizzard. He saw her face stiffen and set itself and the way she started to

reach for him, then thrust her hands behind her, when he'd come crying and bloody-nosed from his first fist fight. He heard her telling him that it was bad to fight, that it never settled anything.

After he'd been beaten up a couple of more times by older and bigger boys, he'd accepted the fact that she was right. He remembered the way she had looked in the pine box, her face so waxy, when he was only fifteen.

Maurer sat up in bed, sweat running from him, and said into the dark: "I've got to stop this. I'll be having nightmares again. I can't have them again."

He sluiced the sweat off his face with the side of his cupped hand and lay back down. The darkness seemed to move and waver over him and he shut his eyes. In rapid succession a parade of pictures danced through his mind. The men he had killed, the hours and hours he'd spent practising to draw, working to the point where he could drive a nail into a post at thirty paces. The first man he had killed: that hadn't been for money but because he was drunk and he'd hoped the man would kill him. But the other man had been even drunker. The feeling he got after that, the sensation of power and invincibility. Then he could feel the crispness of the greenbacks being counted into his hand the first time he got paid for a killing. And flashing in and out, the faces of the men who had died under his guns.

Abruptly, then, that all stopped and the precious wonderful blackness came into his mind at last. He seemed to float from the bed. He didn't move or try to stop it. He seemed to come out of his own body and go away, far away. . . .

He came back, sitting on the edge of the bed, leaning forward, staring into the dark so hard it hurt his eyes. There was somebody else in the room. Maurer could detect a faint movement of something just barely, whitely perceptible, over there by the wall. He heard the soft sound of laughing. Almost girlish laughing. And he knew then who was in the room with him. It was Carruthers.

He had never been sure, never really known whether he'd killed Carruthers. The big blond man had a lot of friends and they'd come after Maurer when he'd shot Carruthers. He'd had to ride from that town fast, lead bee-buzzing around him. Now he knew that Carruthers hadn't died. He was here.

The faintly white blur moved again over there by the wall. Slowly, holding his breath, Maurer reached toward the chair where he'd draped his gun belt. He got hold of one of the Colts and was shocked to feel it get slippery and know that his hands were sweating. He'd never sweated before when he had to kill somebody.

"You waited too long, Carruthers," he said, flatly. The Colt rocked in his hand. The six shots blended all in together. The white blur across

the room disappeared and there was the sound of shattered glass falling.

Maurer fumbled the kerosene lamp alight and looked shaking toward the shattered bureau mirror against the far wall. He looked down at the Colt in his hand. He dropped it. He laughed, quietly.

"Nerves," he said. "What stinkin' nerves won't do to you."

He sat there for a long moment, looking at the jagged shards of glass still around the edges of the mirror. Then his eyes swung toward the door and he saw the knob turning slowly, all the way. Then it stopped and spun around back again, as though somebody had let go. Maurer sat stiffly, his legs aching, getting knots at the calves. He watched the door knob but it didn't turn again. After a long while he reached out toward the lamp, to turn if off. He had to get some sleep. He was getting so heavy-eyed he didn't care whether anybody was out there or not.

Just before his hand touched the lamp, someone knocked on the door. Not loudly, but slow, carefully spaced knocks. Maurer froze again, called: "Who is it?" His voice broke a little.

There was no answer. Only the slow, even knocking once more. Listening to it, it came to Maurer that maybe Blackburn had some friends or relations who were out to make trouble for him. He stood, stepped toward the chair and pulled the other Colt from its holster. He moved toward the door and he'd never felt so lightfooted, so keyed-up. He shoved back the bolt and flung the door open. There was nobody there. The short hallway, with the other doors lining it, was empty.

Maurer stood looking out, then slammed the door. He went and sat back down on the bed, still holding the gun. It happened three more times and the last time he flung himself at the door, shouting: "Damn you, I know you're out there! Show yourself if you want something!" He shouted that over and over.

Two of the other doors along the hall cracked open and Maurer, standing in his own doorway, his face all twisted up to one side, let loose two shots, one at each of those other doors that had opened so suddenly. He saw splinters fly from the door jams, heard the doors slam quickly shut again.

At the same moment, Maurer seemed to feel suddenly hollowed out. The tautness all ran out of him and he leaned against his own door jamb. He said: "I — I'm sorry. A mistake. Please forget it. I'm sorry."

He stumbled back into his room again, slammed and locked the door, and leaned against it. The tiredness hit him now like a solid thing, and his eyes hurt so he could hardly keep them open. He said: "I've got to get some sleep. I'll go crazy if I don't get some sleep."

He half-staggered toward the bed, started to fling himself on it, when

he heard a new sound. Footsteps out there in the hall. They came right up to the door and stopped. Maurer watched the doorknob begin to turn again. He raised the Colt, feeling the hair along his arms and legs prickle up. He whispered: "They're not going to keep me awake. They're going to let me sleep. I'll make 'em."

He emptied the remaining four shots in the Colt through the door. The holes in the door, heart-high, made a perfect square.

There was no sound from out there for a moment and then there were a lot of sounds. Other doors opening and slamming shut.

Footsteps running. Maurer sat there and listened to all that. Then he got up and moved the dresser over in front of the door and piled the two thick wooden chairs on top of the dresser.

In a few minutes the knocking came again, only this time louder and quicker, impatient. A voice shouted: "Open up in there."

Maurer whispered: "They can't get in. They can't get in. They can't stop me from sleeping."

He watched the door shudder and shake as something slammed against it out in the hall.

There were a lot of voices out there now. Maurer watched the dresser and chairs start to sway with the pressure against the door.

Quickly he moved the bed over there, tipped it on end and leaned it against the dresser, reinforcing the door block. Then he refilled both Colts and went over into a far corner of the room and stood there, crouching, watching the furniture piled up against the door. He watched it sway and totter and then topple over, and the door burst inward, hanging from one hinge.

A man Maurer had never seen before stood there, and behind him, the desk clerk from downstairs and several other men. They all looked puzzled and a little scared. Maurer smiled at them.

The big man, in front, the stranger with the puffy eyes and bald head, said: "What's the trouble up here? What's the trouble, huh?"

Maurer told him: "Leave me alone. Blackburn had a fair chance. So did the rest of them. They just weren't good enough. How could they be? This is my trade. Just like a professional prize-fighter can lick any amateur, I can gun-take guys like them any day. Leave me alone now and go back and tell them not to send anybody else up here to bother me. You hear? I'm tired. Just want to sleep."

"Put that iron down," the big man said. "We just want to talk to you."

Maurer saw that he was holding a .44 loosely in his right hand. Maurer saw him start toward him.

He shot twice and the big man's .44 fell from his hand and his jowls danced as his head jerked, and he crumpled over double to the floor.

Maurer never looked at the body.

So tired now he could hardly see straight, Maurer started toward the door just as the two men behind the hotel clerk pushed past him, drawing guns.

Maurer said: "Go away now and let me sleep."

He saw something flash orange in the hands of the other men and he tried to stop walking toward them but he couldn't. He kept moving forward.

Then the same thing happened that had startled him earlier that night.

They all went away and Maurer was standing there in the room alone. There was no furniture, nothing, and now there was no door in the room, either. But he could hear the sound of shots.

The bare, shabby room tipped and Maurer had the sensation that he was plastered to the ceiling, looking down from it, and the strange men were suddenly back in the room again, all looking at each other and talking to each other as though he wasn't there. As though he was nowhere at all.

One of them, he saw, was the freighter he'd cut cards with at the saloon.

He was saying:

"By God, five shots before he dropped. Five damned holes in him. He told me five was his lucky number. He sure-God was mistaken about that number."

Another one said: "We had to do it. You saw his eyes. I never saw eyes like that before and the spit running down his chin. Crazy as a loon."

Maurer wondered what they were talking about but didn't care much, because their voices were fading and they were all going away from him again.

They were going far, far away from him.

# GUNSMOKE'S

## Movie of the Month:

*Starring*

**JOHN HODIAK, JOHN DEREK, DAVID BRIAN, MARIA ELENA MARQUES**

# AMBUSH at TOMAHAWK GAP

**Four hardboiled men,** *just out of Arizona State Prison after serving five years for a holdup, head back to the ghost town of Tomahawk Gap to retrieve the buried holdup loot. They capture a young Navajo girl on the way, taking her with them, and arrive in the town only to discover the buried money is gone. Frantically, they begin digging up sidewalls, tearing down building fronts in their search for the money. Finally trapped in the town by Apaches, they are forced to work their way out of the desperate situation — and they do so without the help of the U. S. Cavalry.*

For technicolor splendor, and taut, suspenseful direction; for intricate manipulation of characters and plot; for some of the most exciting Indian sequences ever to hit the screen; and for a bitterly ironic surprise ending, *Gunsmoke* strongly recommends Columbia Pictures' AMBUSH AT TOMAHAWK GAP.

# The Boy Who Smiled

*The grin never left Mickey's face. Not even when he brought in the ears of his victim.*

BY ELMORE LEONARD

WHEN Mickey Segundo was fourteen, he tracked a man almost two hundred miles — from the Jicarilla Sub-agency down into the malpais.

He caught up with him at a waterhole in late afternoon and stayed behind a rock outcropping watching the man drink. Mickey Segundo had not tasted water in three days, but he sat patiently behind the cover while the man quenched his thirst, watching him relax and make himself comfortable as the hot lava country cooled with the approach of evening.

Finally, Mickey Segundo stirred. He broke open the .50 cal. Gallagher and inserted the paper cartridge and the cap. Then he eased the carbine between a niche in the rocks, sighting on the back of the man's head. He called in a low voice. "Tony Choddi . . ." and as the face with the wide-open eyes came around, he fired casually.

He lay on his stomach and slowly drank the water he needed, filling his canteen and the one that had belonged to Tony Choddi. Then he took his hunting knife and sawed both of the man's ears off, close to the head. These he put into his saddle pouch, leaving the rest for the buzzards.

A week later, Mickey Segundo

carried the pouch into the agency office and dropped the ears on my desk. He said, very simply, "Tony Choddi is sorry he has caused trouble."

I remember asking him, "You're not thinking of going after McKay now, are you?"

"This man Tony Choddi stole stuff, a horse and clothes and a gun," he said with his pleasant smile. "So I thought I would do a good thing and fix it so Tony Choddi didn't steal no more."

With the smile there was a look of surprise, as if to say, "Why would I want to get Mr. McKay?"

A few days later I saw McKay and told him about it and mentioned that he might keep his eyes open. But he said that he didn't give a damn about any breed Jicarilla kid. If the kid felt like avenging his old man he could try, but he'd probably cash in before his time. And as for getting Tony Choddi, he didn't give a damn about that either. He'd got the horse back and that's all he cared about.

After he had said his piece, I was sorry I had warned him. And I felt a little foolish telling one of the biggest men in the Territory to look out for a half-breed Apache kid. I told myself: Maybe you're just rubbing up to him because he's important and could use his influence to help out the agency. . . . And maybe he knows it.

Actually, I had more respect for Mickey Segundo, as a human being, than I did for T. O. McKay. Maybe I felt I owed the warning to McKay because he was a white man. Like saying, "Mickey Segundo's a good boy, but hell, he's half Indian." Just one of those things you catch yourself doing. Like habit. You do something wrong the first time and you know it, but if you keep it up it becomes habit and it's no longer wrong because it's something you've always been doing.

McKay and a lot of people said Apaches were no damn good. The only good one was a dead one. They never stopped to reason it out. They'd been saying it so long, they knew it was true. Certainly any such statement was unreasonable, but damned if I wouldn't sometimes nod my head in agreement, because at those times I'd be with white men and that's the way white men talked.

I might have thought I was foolish, but actually it was McKay who was the fool. He underestimated Mickey Segundo.

That was five years ago. It had begun with a hanging.

Early in the morning, Tudishishn, sergeant of Apache police at the Jicarilla Agency, rode in to tell me that Tony Choddi had jumped the boundaries again and might be in my locale. Tudishishn stayed for half a dozen cups of coffee, though his information didn't last that long. When he had had enough he left as leisurely as he had arrived. Tracking

renegades, reservation jumpers, was Tudishishn's job; still, it wasn't something to get excited about. Tomorrows were for work; todays were for thinking about it.

Up at the agency, they were used to Tony Choddi skipping off. Usually they'd find him later in some shaded barranca, full of tulapai.

It was quiet until late afternoon, but not unusually so. It wasn't often that anything out of the ordinary happened at the sub-agency. There were twenty-six families, one hundred and eight Jicarillas all told, under my charge. We were located almost twenty miles below the reservation proper, and most of the people had been there long before the reservation had been marked off. They had been fairly peaceful then, and remained so now. It was one of the few instances where the Bureau allowed the sleeping dog to lie; and because of that we had less trouble than they did up at the reservation.

There was a sign on the door of the adobe office which described it formally. It read: D. J. Merritt — Agent, Jicarilla Apache Sub-agency — Puerco, New Mexico Territory. It was a startling announcement to post on the door of a squat adobe sitting all alone in the shadow of the Nacimentos. My Apaches preferred higher ground and the closest jacales were two miles up into the foothills. The office had to remain on the mail run, even though the mail consisted chiefly of impossible-to-apply Bureau memoranda.

Just before supper, Tudishishn returned. He came in at a run this time and swung off before his pony had come to a full stop. He was excited and spoke in a confusion of Apache, Spanish and a word here and there of English.

Returning to the reservation he had decided to stop off and see his friends of the Puerco Agency. There had been friends he had not seen for some time and the morning had lengthened into afternoon with tulapai, good talking and even coffee. People had come from the more remote jacales, deeper in the hills, when they learned Tudishishn was there, to hear news of friends at the reservation. Soon there were many people and what looked like the beginning of a good time. Then Senor McKay had come.

McKay had men with him, many men, and they were looking for Mickey Solner — the squaw man, as the Americans called him.

Most of the details I learned later on, but briefly this is what had happened: McKay and some of his men were out on a hunting trip. When they got up that morning McKay's horse was gone, along with a shotgun and some personal articles. They got on the tracks, which were fresh and easy to follow, and by that afternoon they were at Mickey Solner's jacale. His woman and boy were there, and the horse was tethered in front of the mud hut. Mickey Segundo, the boy, was honored to lead such important peo-

ple to his father, who was visiting with Tudishishn.

McKay brought the horse along and when they found Mickey Solner they took hold of him without asking questions and looped a rope around his neck. Then they boosted him up onto the horse they claimed he had stolen. McKay said it would be fitting that way. Tudishishn had left fast when he saw what was about to happen. He knew they wouldn't waste time arguing with an Apache, so he had come to me.

When I got there Mickey Solner was still sitting McKay's chestnut mare with the rope reaching from his neck to the cottonwood bough overhead. His head drooped as if all the fight were out of him and when I came up in front of the chestnut he looked at me with tired eyes, watery and red from tulapai.

I had known Solner for years, but had never become close to him. He wasn't a man with whom you became fast friends. Just his living in an Apache rancheria testified to his being of a different breed. He was friendly enough, but few of the whites liked him — they said he drank all the time and never worked. Maybe most were just envious. Solner was a white man gone Indian, whole hog. That was the cause of the resentment.

His son, Mickey the Second, stood near his dad's stirrup looking at him with a bewildered, pathetic look on his slim face. He held on to the stirrup as if he'd never let it go. And it was the first time, the only time, I ever saw Mickey Segundo without a faint smile on his face.

"Mr. McKay," I said to the cattleman, who was standing relaxed with his hands in his pockets. "I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to take that man down. He's under Bureau jurisdiction and will have to be tried by a court."

McKay said nothing, but Bowie Allison, who was his herd boss, laughed and then said, "You ought to be afraid."

Dolph Bettzinger was there along with his brothers Kirk and Sim. They were hired for their guns and usually kept pretty close to McKay. They did not laugh when Allison did.

And all around the clearing by the cottonwood were eight or ten others. Most of them I recognized as McKay riders. They stood solemnly, some with rifles and shotguns. There wasn't any doubt in their minds what stealing a horse meant.

"Tudishishn says that Mickey didn't steal your horse. These people told him that he was at home all night and most of the morning until Tudishishn dropped in, and then he came down here." A line of Apaches stood a few yards off and as I pointed to them, some nodded their heads.

"Mister," McKay said, "I found the horse at this man's hut. Now you argue that down and I'll kiss the behind of every Apache you got living around here."

"Well, your horse could have been left there by someone else."

"Either way, he had a hand in it," he said curtly.

"What does he say?" I looked up at Mickey Solner and asked him quickly, "How did you get the horse, Mickey?"

"I just traded with a fella." His voice shook, and he held on to the saddle horn as if afraid he'd fall off. "This fella come along and traded with me, that's all."

"Who was it?"

Mickey Solner didn't answer. I asked him again, but still he refused to speak. McKay was about to say something, but Tudishishn came over quickly from the group of Apaches.

"They say it was Tony Choddi. He was seen to come into camp in early morning."

I asked McKay if it was Tony Choddi and finally he admitted that it was. I felt better then. McKay couldn't hang a man for trading a horse.

"Are you satisfied, Mr. McKay? He didn't know it was yours. Just a matter of trading a horse."

McKay looked at me, narrowing his eyes. He looked as if he were trying to figure out what kind of a man I was. Finally he said, "You think I'm going to believe them?"

It dawned on me suddenly that McKay had been using what patience he had for the past few minutes. Now he was ready to continue what they had come for. He had made up his mind long before.

"Wait a minute, Mr. McKay, you're talking about the life of an innocent man. You can't just toy with it like it was a head of cattle."

He looked at me and his puffy face seemed to harden. He was a heavy man, beginning to sag about the stomach. "You think you're going to tell me what I can do and what I can't? I don't need a government representative to tell me why my horse was stolen!"

"I'm not telling you anything. You know Mickey didn't steal the horse. You can see for yourself you're making a mistake."

McKay shrugged and looked at his herd boss. "Well, if it is, it isn't a very big one. Leastwise we'll be sure he won't be trading in stolen horses again." He nodded to Bowie Allison.

Bowie grinned, and brought his quirt up and then down across the rump of the chestnut.

"Yiiiiiiiii. . . ."

The chestnut broke fast. Allison stood yelling after it, then jumped aside quickly as Mickey Solner swung back toward him on the end of the rope.

It was two weeks later, to the day, that Mickey Segundo came in with Tony Choddi's ears. You can see why I asked him if he had a notion of going after McKay. And it was a strange thing. I was talking to a different boy than the one I had last seen under the cottonwood.

When the horse shot out from under his dad, he ran to him like something wild, screaming, and wrapped his arms around the kicking legs trying to hold the weight off the rope.

Bowie Allison cuffed him away and they held him back with pistols while he watched his dad die. From then on, he didn't say a word, and when it was over, walked away with his head down. Then, when he came in with Tony Choddi's ears, he was himself again. All smiles.

I might mention that I wrote to the Bureau of Indian Affairs about the incident since Mickey Solner, legally, was one of my charges; but nothing came of it. In fact, I didn't even get a reply.

Over the next few years Mickey Segundo changed a lot. He became Apache. That is, his appearance changed and almost everything else about him — except the smile. The smile was always there, as if he knew a monumental secret which was going to make everyone happy.

He let his hair grow to his shoulders and usually he wore only a frayed cotton shirt and breechclout; his moccasins were Apache — curled toes and leggings which reached to his thighs. He went under his Apache name which was Peza-a, but I called him Mickey when I saw him and he was never reluctant to talk to me in English. His English was good, discounting grammar.

Most of the time he lived in the same jacale his dad had built, providing for his mother and fitting closer into the life of the rancheria than he did before. But when he was about eighteen he went up to the agency and joined Tudishishn's police. His mother went with him to live at the reservation, but within a year the two of them were back. Tracking friends who happened to wander off the reservation didn't set right with him. It didn't go with his smile.

Tudishishn told me he was sorry to lose him because he was an expert tracker and a dead shot. I know the sergeant had a dozen good sign followers, but very few who were above average with a gun.

He must have been nineteen when he came back to Puerco. In all those years he never once mentioned McKay's name. And I can tell you I never brought it up either.

I saw McKay even less after the hanging incident. If he ignored me before, he avoided me now. As I said, I felt like a fool after warning him about Mickey Segundo, and I'm certain McKay felt only contempt for me for doing it, after sticking up for the boy's dad.

McKay would come through every once in a while, usually going on a hunt up into the Nacimentos. He was a great hunter and would go out for a few days every month or so. Usually with his herd boss, Bowie Allison. He hunted everything that walked, squirmed or flew and I'm told his ranch trophy room was really something to see.

You couldn't take it away from the man; everything he did, he did well. He was in his fifties, but he could shoot straighter and stay in the saddle longer than any of his riders. And he knew how to make money. But it was his arrogance that irked me. Even though he was polite, he made you feel far beneath him. He talked to you as if you were one of the hired help.

One afternoon, fairly late, Tudishishn rode in and said that he was supposed to meet McKay at the adobe office early the next morning. McKay wanted to try the shooting down southwest toward the malpais, on the other side of it, actually, and Tudishishn was going to guide for him.

The Indian policeman drank coffee until almost sundown and then rode off into the shadows of the Nacimentos. He was staying at one of the rancherias, visiting with his friends until the morning.

McKay appeared first. It was a cool morning, bright and crisp. I looked out of the window and saw the five riders coming up the road from the south, and when they were close enough I made out McKay and Bowie Allison and the three Bettzinger brothers. When they reached the office, McKay and Bowie dismounted, but the Bettzingers reined around and started back down the road.

McKay nodded and was civil enough, though he didn't direct more than a few words to me. Bowie was ready when I asked them if they wanted coffee, but McKay shook his head and said they were leaving shortly. Just about then the rider appeared coming down out of the hills.

McKay was squinting, studying the figure on the pony.

I didn't really look at him until I noticed McKay's close attention. And when I looked at the rider again, he was almost on us. I didn't have to squint then to see that it was Mickey Segundo.

McKay said, "Who's that?" with a ring of suspicion to his voice.

I felt a sudden heat on my face, like the feeling you get when you're talking about someone, then suddenly find the person standing next to you.

Without thinking about it, I told McKay, "That's Peza-a, one of my people." What made me call him by his Apache name I don't know. Perhaps because he looked so Indian. But I had never called him Peza-a before.

He approached us somewhat shyly, wearing his faded shirt and breechclout but now with a streak of ochre painted across his nose from ear to ear. He didn't look as if he could have a drop of white blood in him.

"What's he doing here?" McKay's voice still held a note of suspicion and he looked at him as if he were trying to place him.

Bowie Allison studied him the same way, saying nothing.

"Where's Tudishishn? These gentlemen are waiting for him."

"Tudishishn is ill with a demon in his stomach," Peza-a answered. "He has asked me to substitute myself for him." He spoke in Spanish, hesitantly, the way an Apache does.

McKay studied him for some time. Finally, he said, "Well . . . can he track?"

"He was with Tudishishn for a year. Tudishishn speaks highly of him." Again, I don't know what made me say it. A hundred things were going through my head. What I said was true, but I saw it getting me into something. Mickey never looked directly at me. He kept watching McKay, with the faint smile on his mouth.

McKay seemed to hesitate, but then he said, "Well, come on. I don't need a reference . . . long as he can track."

They mounted and rode out.

McKay wanted prongbuck. Tudishishn had described where they would find the elusive herds and promised to show him all he could shoot. But they were many days away. McKay had said if he didn't have time, he'd make time. He wanted good shooting.

Off and on during the first day he questioned Mickey Segundo closely to see what he knew about the herds.

"I have seen them many times. Their hide the color of sand and black horns that reach into the air like bayonets of the soldiers. But they are far."

McKay wasn't concerned with distance. After a while he was satisfied that this Indian guide knew as much about tracking antelope as Tudishishn, and that's what counted. Still, there was something about the young Apache. . . .

"Tomorrow, we begin the crossing of the mapais," Mickey Segundo said. It was evening of the third day, as they made camp at Yucca Springs.

Bowie Allison looked at him quickly. "Tudishishn planned we'd follow the high country down and come one on the plain from the east."

"What's the matter with keeping a straight line," McKay said. "Keeping to the hills is longer, isn't it?"

"Yeah, but that malpais is a blood-dryin' furnace in the middle of August," Bowie grumbled. "You got to be able to pin-point the wells. And even if you find them they might be dry."

McKay looked at Peza-a for an answer.

"If Senor McKay wishes to ride for two additional days that is for him to say. But we can carry our water with ease." He went to his saddle pouch and drew out two collapsed, rubbery bags. "These, from the stomach of the horse, will hold much water. Tomorrow we fill canteens and these, and the water can be made to last five, six days. Even if the wells are dry, we have water."

Bowie Allison grumbled under

his breath, looking with distaste at the horse intestine water sacks.

McKay rubbed his chin thoughtfully. He was thinking of prongbuck. Finally, he said, "We'll cut across the lava."

Bowie Allison was right in his description of the malpais. It was a furnace, a crusted expanse of desert that stretched into another world. Saguaro and ocotillo stood nakedly sharp against the whiteness and off in the distance were ghostly looming buttes, gigantic tombstones for the lava waste. Horses shuffled choking white dust and the sun glare was a white blistering shock that screamed its brightness. Then the sun would drop suddenly, leaving a nothingness that could be felt. A life that had died a hundred million years ago.

McKay felt it, and that night he spoke little.

The second day was a copy of the first, for the lava country remained monotonously the same. McKay grew more irritable as the day wore on and time and again he would snap at Bowie Allison for his grumbling. The country worked at the nerves of the two white men, while Mickey Segundo watched them.

On the third day they passed two waterholes. They could see the shallow crusted bottoms and the fissures that the tight sand had made cracking in the hot air. That night McKay said nothing.

In the morning there was a blue haze on the edge of the glare; they could feel the land beneath them begin to rise. Chaparral and patches of toboso grass became thicker and dotted the flatness and by early afternoon the towering rock formations loomed near at hand. They had then one water sack two-thirds full; but the other, with their canteens, was empty.

Bowie Allison studied the gradual rise of the rock wall, passing his tongue over cracked lips. "There could be water up there. . . . Sometimes the rain catches in hollows and stays there a long time if it's shady."

McKay squinted into the air. The irregular crests were high and dead still against the sky. "Could be."

Mickey Segundo looked up and then nodded.

"How far to the next hole?" McKay asked.

"Maybe one day."

"If it's got water. . . . Then how far?"

"Maybe two day. We come out on the plain then near the Datil Mountains and there is water, streams to be found."

McKay said, "That means we're half way. We can make last what we got, but there's no use killing ourselves." His eyes lifted to the peaks again then dropped to the mouth of a barranca which cut into the rock. He nodded to the dark canyon which was partly hidden by a dense growth of mesquite. "We'll leave our stuff there and go on to see what we can find."

They unsaddled the horses and ground-tied them and hung their last water bag in the shade of a mesquite bush.

Then they walked up canyon until they found a place which would be the easiest to climb.

They went up and they came down, but when they were again on the canyon floor their canteens still rattled lightly with their steps. Mickey Segundo carried McKay's rifle in one hand and the limp, empty water bag in the other.

He walked a step behind the two men and watched their faces as they turned to look back overhead. There was no water.

The rocks held nothing, not even a dampness. They were naked now and loomed brutally indifferent, and bone dry with no promise of moisture.

The canyon sloped gradually into the opening. And now, ahead, they could see the horses and the small fat bulge of the water bag hanging from the mesquite bough.

Mickey Segundo's eyes were fixed on the water sack. He looked steadily at it.

Then a horse screamed. They saw the horses suddenly pawing the ground and pulling at the hackamores that held them fast. The three horses and the pack mule joined together now, neighing shrilly as they strained dancing at the ropes.

And then a shape the color of sand darted through the mesquite thicket so quickly that it seemed a shadow.

Mickey Segundo threw the rifle to his shoulder. He hesitated. Then he fired.

The shape kept going, past the mesquite background and out into the open.

He fired again and the coyote went up into the air and came down to lie motionless.

It only jerked in death. McKay looked at him angrily. "Why the hell didn't you let me have it! You could have hit one of the horses!"

"There was not time."

"That's two hundred yards! You could have hit a horse, that's what I'm talking about!"

"But I shot it," Mickey Segundo said.

When they reached the mesquite clump they did not go over to inspect the dead coyote. Something else took their attention. It stopped the white men in their tracks.

They stared unbelieving at the wetness seeping into the sand, and above the spot, the water bag hanging like a punctured bladder. The water had quickly run out.

Mickey Segundo told the story at the inquiry. They had attempted to find water, but it was no use; so they were compelled to try to return.

They had almost reached Yucca Springs when the two men died. Mickey Segundo told it simply. He was sorry he had shot the water bag, but what could he say? God directs the actions of men mysteriously.

*Especially since Mickey had aided*

*God by knowing about a hidden spring.*

The county authorities were disconcerted, but they had to be satisfied with the apparent facts.

McKay and Allison were found ten miles from Yucca Springs and brought in. There were no marks of violence on either of them, and they found three hundred dollars in McKay's wallet. It was officially recorded that they died from thirst and exposure.

A terrible way to die just because some damn Apache couldn't shoot straight. Peza-a survived because he was lucky, along with the fact that he was Apache which made him tougher. Just one of those things.

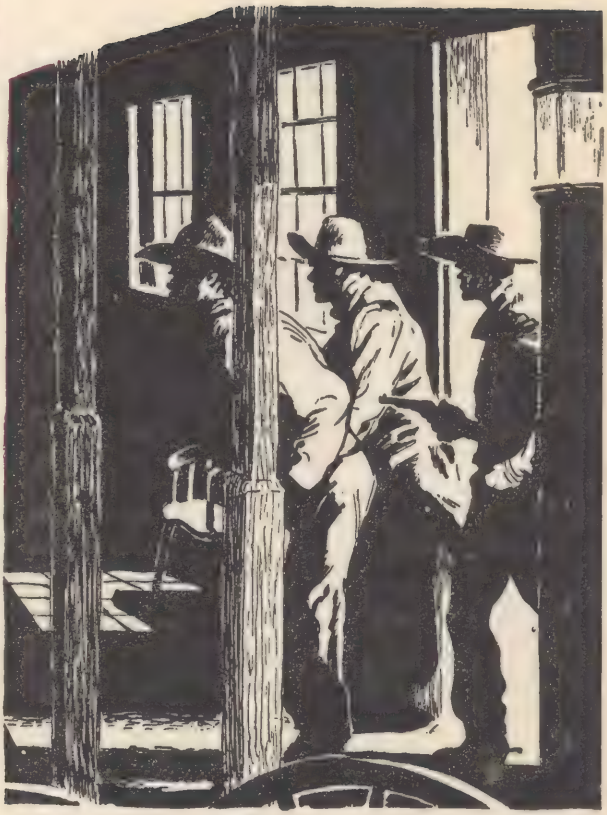
Mickey continued living with his mother at the sub-agency. His old Gallagher carbine kept them in meat and they seemed happy enough just existing.

Tudishishn visited them occasionally and when he did they would have a tulapai party. Everything was normal.

Mickey's smile was still there but maybe a little different.

But I've often wondered what Mickey Segundo would have done if that coyote had not run across the mesquite thicket. . . .

# BLUE CHIP LAW



*The little drummer was disappointed.... After all, he hadn't even seen a dead body*

BY

BILL ERIN

THE bat-wing doors of the bar swung inward, and a tall, lean, quiet-faced man walked through the opening. His thin face was tanned a mahogany brown and his lips were severe. His eyes were steady and penetrating.

The solitary bartender looked up from where he had just served a drummer, and nodded. "Mornin', Charlie," the newcomer said easily. He stumped across the floor on his high heels to where a row of pegs held chaps and spurs. He unbuckled his leather chaps and slipped easily out of them. He hung them on an empty peg, where they were soon joined by his spurs. He beat the dust out of his pants and shirt, and slogged his wide-brimmed hat across his arm once or twice to beat the dust out of it. Then he rearranged

the creases in the hat and set it carefully on his head.

The men in the room, with the exception of the drummer, watched him quietly. The drummer already had one too many and was staring moodily at the bar. The drummer wore a derby and checked coat.

The newcomer stumped to the bar and ordered a whisky. The bartender poured the drink and put the bottle next to the full shot glass. He tossed off the drink and savored it. He had nodded to several of the men, and now he turned to them.

"Anyone like a little morning poker?" he asked. Several of them nodded and they moved to one of the big, round tables, which had a deck of cards and chips ready. The newcomer took bottle and glass with him to the table. "Bring glasses, Charlie," he said. "This bottle's on me."

The newcomer hitched his low-hung gun around to where it was more comfortable as he sat, pushed his hat back on his head, and ignored the second drink of whisky he had poured himself. The cards were shuffled and the men watched in solemn silence as one man appointed himself banker and placed chips in front of each man.

"When's Pete coming?" one of the men asked the newcomer quietly, as the cards were shuffled.

The newcomer looked up under his eyebrows at the questioner. "He said noon. Charlie, tell me when it's noon."

The cards were dealt and the game proceeded. Only the quiet words of the players broke the silence of the room.

"I'll open blue," said one man.

"Call," said another.

"Pass!"

"Deal me out!"

"Call!"

"Wild, woolly, great open West," muttered the half-drunken drummer from against the bar. He sneered sloppily. "Dirt, dust and despondency. What a territory to draw."

"I'll take two."

"Three!"

"Three!"

"Haven't seen a dead man since I been here. Bartender, another whisky." The drummer pounded his glass twice on the bar.

The bartender reached behind him for a bottle and filled the glass. He replaced the bottle on the backbar.

There was a clink of chips and a murmur of bets from the poker table.

"The West, where men are men," the drummer said derisively. He sneered into his glass. "Ain't seen a man since I been out here," he said loudly.

One of the men, temporarily out of the game, raised his eyes casually to the back of the drummer, then returned his look to the game. The bat-wing doors swung open and a man with a star on his black vest came into the room. He moved his

gaze slowly around until it fastened on the newcomer. He walked slowly to the poker table.

The man with the star stood silently for a while and watched the game. The drummer had subsided and was hanging drunkenly to the bar. The players were aware of the man with the star, but they didn't acknowledge his presence.

"Is there any truth to what I've been hearing?" the man with the star asked quietly. He might have been talking to any of the players, but his look was on the newcomer. None of the men raised their sight from the game. They seemed to know who the man with the star was addressing.

"Depends on what you've been hearing," the newcomer said. "I'm pat," he added, in the same flat voice.

"You know what I've been hearing," the man with the star said quietly. "I don't like that sort of thing in this town."

"I imagine you don't," the newcomer said. He looked at the man with the star for the first time. His eyes were very bleak and cold, with nothing readable in them. "Ain't no way you can stop it, is there?" It was more a challenge than a question.

The man with the star was quiet. The entire room was filled with a quiet that seemed pressured.

"I reckon not," the man with the star admitted. "Some day, maybe, but I reckon not now."

The room seemed to exhale with a carefully guarded softness. One man clinked his pile of chips as he riffled them. The newcomer and another man consulted their cards. "I'll bet," the newcomer said, and he pushed a small stack of blues into the center of the table.

His opponent studied the newcomer's inscrutable face for a few moments. He looked again at his cards. "Call," he said.

"Aces and ladies," the newcomer said.

"Three humble little ducks," his opponent said. He reached out and raked in the chips. The man with the star turned on his heel and stalked out of the room. The batwing doors flapped and swung idly behind him.

"Lousy, milk-fed West," the drummer grumbled.

"Five minutes to twelve," Charlie said aloud after consulting his watch.

"Thanks," the newcomer said, and he stood lazily. He put out his arms and stretched. He looked at his neat pile of chips and was conscious of the other men watching him. "Leave them," he said. "I don't think I'll cash in, yet." He grinned, a queer sour grin, picked up his second drink from where it had stood during the game, and tossed it off. He hitched his belt, loosened his gun, and went out through the doors.

The men at the table drifted to the big window that looked out on

the single, dusty street. The bartender put down his rag, and the cigar in his mouth bobbled up and down several times with indecision. "Excuse me," he said to the drummer. He raised a section of the bar which was a gate and made his way to the window. He stood on his tiptoes to peer over the shoulders of the men in front of him.

"Wha's matter?" the drummer asked. "Wha's goin' on?"

From outside the bar-room came the roll and crash of shots. The heavy sounds banged against the front of the building and reverberated along the street. The bartender's cigar waggled frantically as it shifted from one side of his mouth to the other.

The drummer straightened as though it were he who had been shot. He swung around at the bar with his eyes wide. The men at the window turned back into the room and the bartender went back behind the bar. He lit the cigar again and the hand that held the match trembled a little.

The drummer lurched across the room to the window and his eyes widened. The flush of drinking went out of his cheeks, and was replaced by pallor.

The bat-wing doors swung aside and the newcomer re-entered. He stumped over to the poker table and sat down. His hands were steady and sure as he picked up the deck of cards.

The drummer went back to the bar for his heavy sample-case. "Gotta catch m'train," he mumbled to the bartender. He walked quickly across the room to the swinging doors. They flapped wildly behind him.

None of the men turned. At the poker table the quiet men calmly watched the deft, quick, brown hands shuffle the cards for the next deal.

"Takes Jacks to open," the newcomer said.

# ROUNDUP

Although almost everyone calls *A. B. Guthrie, Jr.*, "Bud," his full name is Alfred Bertram.

There's nothing of the conventional author about this Western writer who won the Pulitzer Prize for *The Big Sky*. He is just under 50 but looks and talks like an experienced young newspaper reporter. His experiences include working on a Kentucky newspaper, with the Forest Service, on a Mexican irrigation project, for Western Electric in California and even clerking. After THE BIG SKY, he began to devote his time exclusively to writing.

*Noel Loomis* is the author of Macmillan's *Rim of the Caprock*, which will soon be reprinted by Bantam Books, and which is now being filmed by Universal-International. Having written more than one million published words, he spends his spare time collecting old mail-order catalogs, magazines, and newspapers — anything to help recreate the life of the West and Southwest in the nineteenth century. *The Man Who Had No Thumbs*, is one result of this arduous research — and he invites any correspondence which may give him more information.

*Steve Frazee* (*Great Medicine*) is the $2,000 winner in a recent national mystery-fiction contest. He is, however, a versatile writer whose output numbers hundreds of published stories of all types. Now living in Salida, Colorado, he continues to turn out diversified and always top-quality stuff. His adventure novel, *Shining Mountains*, was published by Rinehart, and he's since tucked some four published Western novels under his belt. Frazee's strongest point is the honesty and authenticity of his work, and *Great Medicine* is no exception.

*Frank O'Rourke* (*The Crooked Nail*) was born in Colorado and educated in Missouri, and he writes of the West — old and new — with sure knowledge of the country and its history. His stories have appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Collier's*, *McCall's*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Esquire*, and many other top magazines. *Action at Three Peaks* was the first novel in O'Rourke's overall plan to cover different stages of the West's development. *Thunder on the Buckhorn* was the second, and his latest is *Blackwater*. They make an exciting trio.

*Nelson Nye* (*Rock Bottom*) is a Western writer who lives in Tucson, Arizona. He also looks like a Western writer, talks like one, and knows horses like the back of his corral. There is nothing phony or pretentious about his yarns. He writes of the West he knows, and he does so in the colorful language and with all the power of the West. He has written more novels than can be counted on both hands, the latest of which are *Desert of the Damned* and *Wide Loop*. The story in this issue marks one of his rare appearances in the short story length.

*Jack Schaefer* describes himself: "As far back as my memory ranges, I've been feuding with folk, teachers, and assorted employers who are convinced that Jack must have been a baptismal John and that Schaefer should have two f's. This is no joke." Schaefer with one f also has a strong newspaper background and even met his wife behind a reporters' desk. Now she drives him to his typewriter so she can get to hers. Together they raise children, Angus cattle, drive cub tractors and are collecting courage to ride in the county hunt.

**IN THIS ISSUE . . .**

# THE MAN WHO HAD NO THUMBS

*The slender man drew himself up before the fire and fixed bloodshot eyes on Marson. "I got away from the Chiricahuas four days ago," he said. "I been walkin' ever since."*

*"You're a liar," Marson said coldly. "You never escaped from no Apaches after this long."*

*The stranger took another short drink. "How do you think I got away?"*

*"You was sent," said Marson.*

*"Who'd send me?"*

*"The Apaches. They hate my guts and so do you. You turned coyote, Hobart, when you found out we was after scalps."*

*Hobart ripped open his worn buckskin shirt at the front and showed a mass of white and red scars over his chest and stomach.*

*"Does that look like something I asked for?"*

**READ** Noel Loomis' THE MAN WHO HAD NO THUMBS, a story about a blood-thirsty group of white men being paid for every Apache they kill and scalp. A powerful tale by a master of the Western story.

***Plus new stories by:*** **A. B. GUTHRIE, JR., JACK SCHAEFER, FRANK O'ROURKE, STEVE FRAZEE** — ***and many more!***

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